

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

15[¢]
JUNE



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by FRANK BONHAM
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• HOT-LEAD REQUIEM

by WILLIAM R. COX

• YUKON'S PHANTOM CACHE

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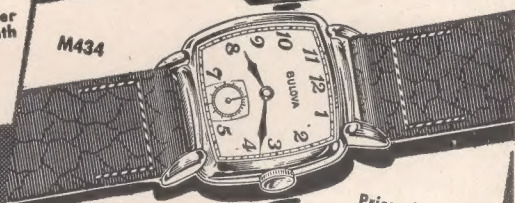
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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BONE BOUNTY

By

ROY VANDERGOOT

The restless bones of Buffalo Horn kept the punchers in buryin' money.

IN THE spring of 1877 the Bannocks under Chief Buffalo Horn went on the warpath. Buffalo Horn had served as scout under General Oliver Otis Howard during the Nez Percé campaign. Becoming disgusted with Howard's tactics, Buffalo Horn had quit in a huff, promising that some day he would show the paleface chieftain how to make war. Now he was keeping that promise.

A horde of plumed and painted Bannock braves swept a path of death through Idaho and Oregon. First item was old man Smith's place in Happy Valley. When they got through with him, Smith wasn't Smith anymore and Happy Valley bore the wrong adjective.

Next came the French ranch on Blixen River in Harney Valley. Old man French stood the red hellions off with a rifle—the only one on the place—while the women and kids made their get-away in the wagon. Then French jumped asaddle his fastest pony and managed to out-race the Bannocks.

The Cummins ranch on the John Day River was a replica in performance to the French place. Cummins rallied a few men to make a stand while the women-folk and the young'ns high-tailed it in the wagon.

A Bannock bullet plowed a groove in Emil Scheutz's chest. Cummins helped the stricken man on a horse, and together they escaped.

Murder, arson and pillage followed in the wake of Buffalo Horn's band, until at the battle of South Mountain he was laid low. At that bullet-shindig in the Owyhee

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POPULAR FILMS

**Good Movie-Going
For Fiction Fans**

Palmer Picks:

For A Western: "The Red Pony" with Myrna Loy, Robert Mitchum, Louis Calhern, Sheppard Strudwick, Peter Miles (Republic). Technicolor.



Not in a sense a true Western, but a picture laid against a ranch and a boy's dream about a pony come true, which even the most calloused Western picture-goer will find moving. Unlike most horse pictures, people remain the central characters in this John Steinbeck story. As the story unfolds you see the boy (Peter Miles) growing apart from his father (Sheppard Strudwick) through his love for his pony and the hero-worship of a ranch hand (Robert Mitchum) who helps him raise the animal. Myrna Loy, as the mother, understands the boy and the byplay with her husband about their child is adult. It all resolves itself when the pony dies and the boy takes a closer step to manhood. He is rewarded in the end by a new-born colt and a new sense of the way things are in the world.

A simple story, well-told and rich in human values and colorful backgrounds.

• • •

For Adventure: "Canadian Pacific" with Randolph Scott and Jane Wyatt. (20th Century-Fox). Cinecolor.



Building this famous Canadian railroad was more than just ties and trestles—at least according to this version where it takes sixguns and two-fisted action by Tom Andrews (Randolph Scott) to overcome bad whites.

Although Andrews has a temporary love affair with a female doctor (Jane Wyatt) in the railroad camp, it is his own true love, a French-Indian girl, who warns him of the Indians' plan to attack the camp. Andrews goes on a private

sortie to prevent the signal for the attack from being given and gets the ringleaders—but too late. Returning to camp he joins the fight which the Indians abandon after they hear the whistle from a relief train.

The railroad background gives a different flavor to this outdoor action picture. Plenty of bang-bang and dust-biting keep it fast paced.

• • •

For Murder Drama: "Too Late for Tears" with Lizabeth Scott, Dan Duryea and Don de Fore (United Artists).



Mysteriously, Jane Palmer (Lizabeth Scott) and her husband acquire a leather bag containing a fortune in cash. Although she is determined to keep it, her husband thinks differently and checks it at Union Station. With the help of a black-mailing crook (Dan Duryea), Jane drowns her husband, but they fail to find the claim check for the money. The husband's sister and a stranger (Don de Fore), who arrive on the scene, locate the check. Jane takes it at gun's point, sheds herself of the blackmailer with a well-administered dose of poison and flees to Mexico. The sister and stranger follow her, unravel the plot and bring Jane to a just end.

Suspensefully played, the picture makes for some spine-tingling moments.

• • •

For Sports: "Take Me Out To The Ball Game" with Frank Sinatra, Esther Williams, Gene Kelly (MGM). Technicolor.



Imagine Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly, as entertainers turned baseball players, fielding "hot ones" for a baseball team owned by Esther Williams. Silly, but nonetheless fun. When a gambler (Edward Arnold), who is betting against the team, inveigles Kelly to direct the chorus at a night club, Kelly begins to slip from the loss of sleep and is benched. Eventually, wised up by a little gal who is sweet on Sinatra, he gets back in the line-up. The gambler tries to stop him but a well-aimed pop bottle by Esther Williams saves the day and the pennant.

The picture—and the baseball—are played for the laughs.

by Ted Palmer

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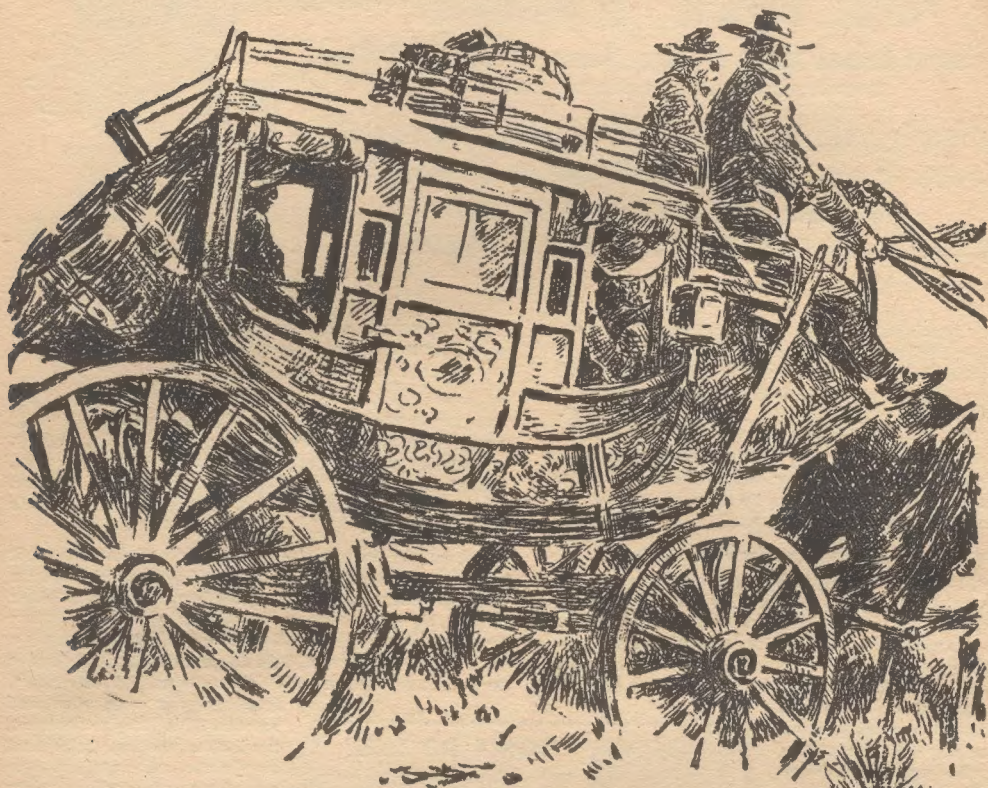
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THE SHIRT-TAIL

Gripping Frontier Novel



A stagecoach approached them in a banner of dust.

CHAPTER

Home From the Wars

1

They had never been quite sure just where one man's land ended and another's began. It didn't matter: there was plenty to go around. They were less sure now, after three years away from it. When they passed Muddy Creek, Elmo Blucher said, "I reckon we're in your back pasture now, Joe."

Joe Carlin looked around at the high hills fencing the stage road in like big, knurly Idaho potatoes. "Yep. I reckon so."

The hills were just about as steep as cattle could manage without ladders, crusted with volcanic rock and fuzzed with fall hay. They were the color of a cougar, and the contrast between them and the sky, blue as a summer lake, was something to see.

"Some day," Ad Kelly said, "we ought to get a surveyor down and pound some stakes."

"We're good neighbors, ain't we?" Carlin grinned. "If you feel cramped, help

VOLUNTEERS

By FRANK BONHAM



Joe Carlin, serving with the Oregon Volunteers to protect his land from the redskins, returned to find deadlier enemies at home.

yourself to an acre or two of mine, Ad."

They chuckled. Of one thing they were damned sure: it was the greatest cow country in the world, eastern Oregon, and it was great to be back. They wore blue Army shirts and leather britches; the legislature had never got around to voting them both pants and shirts.

They rode the same crowbaiters they had enlisted with in 'sixty-three, when the Snakes became intolerable, flexing their muscles because the Federal troops had been withdrawn. The state was going to pay them for the use of their horses, too, but they had rescinded that order. And the dollar a day they'd been voted was run through the sausage grinder last year and came out as five dollars a month.

Most of the men living on horsemeat and sweat those three years thought they were being treated pretty shabbily. Carlin figured they couldn't crab too much because they were only doing it for their own good, anyway. But it was through now, the Snakes back on the reservation, the roads and the ranches safe. And all they wanted was to walk back into the corral and pick up a branding iron and say, "Now, where was that gotch-eared year-lin'?"

About noon that golden fall day they focused down from the broad picture to some details. "Them wild horses will have to be rounded up and shot," Elmo Blucher said. "They've ate your grass down to bedrock, Joe."

"I was noticing. I'd say it was cows, myself."

Carlin was too tall for his weight. Horsemeat put gristle on a man, but not much fat. His face was thin and as dark as the seat of his saddle, so that his blue eyes looked pale. He'd never been harder, but it was a jumpy kind of hardness. He was trained down to nerves and sinew.

They rode a hill to look around. "Yep. Cows," Blucher said. He was a big corn-fed looking cowman. His nose was prominent as a saddle horn and everything about him but his head was slow and thick. It was an oblique way of saying that there was something queer going on. What they were looking at was a couple of cowboys pushing a bunch of fifty-odd cattle down a winding gap between the hills.

All this was Joe Carlin's range, and they had been talking about the fine shape it would be in. The bunch grass cured like domestic hay and, after three years rest, it should be in wonderful condition. But the every-day manner of the punchers indicated they hadn't just started chousing cattle around here yesterday, and the grass looked like a worn-out rug.

They followed them. The shirt-tail of a worry dangled in Carlin's mind. Down Seven-Dollar Creek the herd trailed and out onto the bottom of a valley. A mile beyond, where another stream rambled in, were his old ranch buildings and corral. The punchers turned the cattle into the pasture behind a pole-and-runner fence. They started for the small grouted rock cabin behind some elms. Carlin spurred his pony and let the drumroll of its hoofs stop them. Kelly and Blucher slung along behind.

Carlin pulled his horse around on its hind hoofs and looked the men over. One was a freckled singletree of a rider with a long nose and spectacularly crooked teeth. The other man was a big, durable looking fellow with a stony face and a clasp-purse of a mouth. He wore a brown canvas coat and had the collar of his shirt buttoned. He studied Carlin with a frown.

"This road go to Cross Hollow?" Carlin asked.

"It's a good piece yet." The man had a quick, cityish speech.

"Make it by night, though?"

"Sure." He looked them over in a brisk way. "Welcome to pass the night, if you want."

"Thanks." Carlin tilted his hat and looked at the ranch buildings. "Nice layout. You the boss man?"

"OH, NO." He put out a hand which looked wide and hard as a board, and his smile was like a crack in a cement wall. "My name's Tom Braga. Just the range boss. Shoshone Land & Livestock's the outfit. Major Orlando Starkey, you know."

Carlin looked at Blucher. "I hadn't heard of him. Had you?"

Blucher massaged his jaws and chin, covered with a short taffy-colored beard. "Starkey. Was he with the O.V.C.?"

Tom Braga said with a patient smile,

"Starkey was with the Federals. He was at a lot of the big shows."

"Oh, yeah," Carlin said, as if that explained everything. "This is good-looking land. How many cows will it support?"

"Say seventy-five to the section."

"Good Lord!" Ad Kelly started.

Braga shrugged. "Sure, you could run a hundred, but you'd kill the grass."

Carlin found his breath suddenly short. When he spoke his voice was notched higher. "When we left here, we thought forty was running it too close. What did you run before you ran cattle—hogs?"

Braga's face got a turgid look. The other puncher leaned across the swell of his saddle. "I tell you one thing we ain't run. That's O.V.C's. But we're apt to start pretty soon."

Carlin's anger had the bit. He spurred his horse against the other's and brought his hat across his face in a hard backhand slash. The man yelled and made fumbling motions at his revolver. Carlin twisted it out of his hand and threw it on the ground. He crowded past him and swivelled in the saddle to see that Elmo was covering Tom Braga. He swung to face Braga.

"What happened to Joe Carlin, that used to own this place?"

Braga's eyes were trying to be three places at once. He kept his hands resting on the pommel of his saddle, however, and his fury had annealed into a cautious edge of watchfulness. "I didn't know he ever run cattle down this far. His place was north, still is. This is Rafter S. I suppose you're Carlin," he said.

"I'm Carlin, and this is Ad Kelly and Elmo Blucher. We used to own this country. I'll be back down in a day or two, so you'll have time to pack."

Braga nodded with grave mockery. "At your service. But just to tie it up in ribbon, better bring along a document of some kind. We're pretty slow to pack."

Ambition hadn't used to be such a man-eating proposition with the bunch-grassers. Land-lust didn't scream at a man to take another inch, another inch, until somebody else began screaming. Judge Myron Utley was always after them to pay a surveyor to run their lines, but they hadn't time for such nonsense.

Now Joe Carlin had a bitter wish that

he had put off joining up long enough to get his land bounded and recorded.

As they jogged on toward the town, a stagecoach passed them with a fluttered banner of dust, and farther along they swung around a long string of freight. They passed hundreds of cattle industriously tearing the graze to hell. Elmo's range looked as if sheep had been over it after a hungry winter. They sloped down into the town in the late afternoon. It was a pleasant village of poplars going yellow with the autumn, of many frame buildings and a few brick, and picket-fenced homes and a single steeple pointing through the trees to better things up there. It had done well during the war, fattening on stage and freight travel, no doubt, and a little farming. To Joe Carlin, it looked just a little self-important: Emory's bank had new iron shutters, as if there were something to steal, now. All the frame buildings on the main street had been painted. A covey of horses and turnouts were clustered at the side of a big new frame structure called the Cross Hollow Community Hall.

There were few on the street to notice them. Nobody they knew. A girl crossed the street, going toward the black lava-block courthouse, a lithe girl whose long dark skirt swished enticingly as she walked. She wore short braids tied with little yellow ribbons, and her hair was blue-black. Injun blood. Ad Kelly whistled approvingly.

She turned in the middle of the road, as though she had heard. For a moment she peered at them with a hand to shade her eyes. Then the hand went up in a quick, enthusiastic wave. "Joe!" she called. "Joe Carlin, and Elmo and Ad!"

Then they knew it was Tennessee, Judge Utley's half-breed daughter. She had been an inconsequential sixteen when they rode away, but she was a luscious nineteen now. She walked to them with grown-up grace and they all dismounted and embarrassedly accepted her welcome. She said, "I've saved a kiss and a hug for each of you," and she paid off.

CARLIN'S lasted longest. Something in him choked up. Having a girl in your arms was like first biting home-made pickles after the mumps: it was marvelous,

but it ached. Tennessee had learned about rose-water and hairbrushes. She smelled good, and her hair was smooth and clean and parted with a razor-edge line down the center. They used to kid Joe about her having a crush on him. His half-breed sweetheart. When they grew up like this, you began looking for another name than half-breed.

She stepped back to look at them. "Boys, you're gaunt as jaybirds. What did they feed you while you were fighting Injuns?"

"Horsemeat," Joe said. He got it. She was declaring her allegiance to her adopted people.

"How's your dad?" Joe asked.

"Fat as a boar hog," Tennessee laughed. "He's at the courthouse. Coming over?"

Joe looked around. "Kind of looking for a man. Major Orlando Starkey. Know him?"

She gave a wry smile. Her teeth were white and even; her eyes were dark, but she had less color in her skin than they had. "The savior of Cross Hollow," she said. "That's his office next to the Pastime. But I think he's at the community Hall. They're having a meeting."

"We'll look, anyway, and then be over."

"All right, Joe. Don't get in a muss with him."

The office of the Shoshone Land and Livestock Company was elegantly furnished. A flowered carpet silenced their boots like cougar-paws. There was a roll-top desk, a revolving bookcase, a reservoir lamp on the desk and things like diplomas and maps on the walls. But no one was there, and Joe walked curiously to inspect a map of Shoshone County. He found four large plates labeled SLL Co. There were some smaller spreads he knew. Then he found a little patch of land between Seven Dollar Creek and the county road tabbed: *Carlin*. It was about the size of his old buck pasture. Elmo and Ad had come off with some second-rate land back from all the roads and streams.

"There it is," he said.

After a moment they departed. It began to take shape in them. Formless outrage began to acquire point and edge on the stone of downright treachery. Starkey was the bull's eye in Carlin's mind, but he

wondered what his old friends who'd been too busy or too old to fight had been doing while this was put over on them. And whether they had bought stock in the company.

They found Judge Utley in his chambers and had a drink of his private stock. He was a massive old man with a beard coarse as mattress stuffing, always soiled with food or tobacco juice. He was a taciturn, sad man, but his eyes were sympathetic and humorous. After this they crossed the alley to Utley's small rock house.

Tennessee kept coming and going from the kitchen with platters of venison seasoned with bull-nose peppers; head-cheese spiced with a thin red sauce, and fried potatoes and pickled eggs and tender onions. They regarded her with amazement. Cayuse blood would never hold this girl back from getting a man.

But then they were pushing back their chairs and lighting pipes and cigars, and Carlin said frowningly: "Somebody named Starkey thinks he's got us on the short end of the rope, I hear."

"Own damned fault," snapped Utley. "Told you to get your lines run and recorded."

"Still our land, ain't it?" Kelly snapped. He was tall and narrow as a hall door, with a long face, a bald red neck and large ears.

"Don't know," Utley said.

Carlin got on his feet. "You don't know! You damned well do know! You were here when we first came in."

"I know what's right, but I ain't sure what's legal. It's been chained and recorded now."

"This Starkey," said Elmo Blucher. "Just about fit a southbound saddle, wouldn't he? Then we'll own it again."

"You and the Shoshone Land and Livestock Company. There's fifty-odd stockholders, including the bank."

Carlin's head raged, but he tried to hang onto reason before he rushed out of here with his gun in his hand. "So while we were off fighting the Snakes, our friends sold us out! What were you doing while all this was going on?"

Tennessee ventured onto male ground timidly. "Wouldn't you like to hear the whole story, boys?"

They tamed down a little. Utley gripped the arms of his chair. "Starkey ain't a bad man. I don't like Tom Braga, though, nor Pilar Corta, that sheep-lovin' segundo of his. They came in a year ago. Starkey preached that by banding together they could buy better stock and such than they could alone. They all threw in their land and stock and got shares. Starkey bought unrecorded land as his share, and he had some cows. They told him to watch out for you boys' interests, and he promised, but when the surveyors left I think you'd been sweated a little."

"We'd been left a little, you mean," Blucher growled.

Carlin asked, "How's the come-one come-all working out?"

"Oh, they make almost as much as they did alone. Some fellas threw in sagebrush land like that cactus empire of Wadleigh's north of town, and that watered down the real profits." The judge massaged his eyes as if he were tired, and expecting to be more tired. "What do you aim to do about it?"

"Put 'em off," Carlin said.

He plucked his hat from a chair. The others were with him as he went to the door. But Tennessee was standing there in the way, a small and slender shape outlined by the sun on the path. There was something mothering and anxious about her. "You'd have to kill somebody to do that, Joe. That's not what you want, is it?"

"I'm nearsighted. I can't see beyond getting my land back." He tried to move past her; she held his arm.

"You didn't go away to come back to this, Joe. What they've done wasn't fair, but it isn't any more fair to yourself to go blundering in and lose it all, and maybe get shot."

For someone who had no particular stake in his luck, it was curious she should be so worried. She was breathing hard, her thin, anxious features dark with emotion. To Carlin, just back from three years of bushwack fighting, it was amusing, so much emphasis on a little thing like a possible scrap. He took her face between his hands.

"Nobody on our side's going to get hurt, papoose," he said.

"Don't call me that."

Carlin laughed, pinched her cheek, and walked by her. Elmo lumbered in beside him as they went toward the courthouse, where their horses were racked. They heard Judge Utley, a wistful prophet who expected to be laughed at.

"First and last, the law's the shortest distance between two points. But no use trying to tell a man who never even had the sense to protect his rights in the first place."

CHAPTER

2

Wineglass Revenge

The Cross Hollow Community Hall was a big whitewashed barn with a steep roof and a few small windows. Since it was colder inside than out, the door was open. They walked in quietly. It would have seated about a hundred people on its plain, backless benches. Some two dozen ranchmen and women were gathered at the back. A large man in a gray suit sat at a plain table, talking in a calm, forceful voice. Carlin sat down in back with his friends. The room was dim, and the man at the table peered at the trio without making much of them. A couple of the women glanced back and stared.

"Now, there's nothing alarming in a situation like this," Major Orlando Starkey declared. "Profits are slim this year. It always costs something to ante into a game, but after that the profits can begin. Now, that land north of town—" His mind muled on it and he poked at the table with a penknife. "It's pore. Damned pore. I don't think it will ever raise thrifty cattle. But I'll tell you what it would raise."

There was some back-straightening on the benches. "Sheep," Starkey said. Flat out. Sheep! He had courage, Carlin decided.

A man cleared his throat. It was the portentous throat-clearing of Hollis Emory, the banker. "I don't know about sheep," he said.

"But I do," the major smiled. And he began to talk about sheep, until before he was through it began to seem that they were the bravest, prettiest little animals God ever taught to get fat on rocks and sage. One man and two dogs could herd

twelve hundred of them, and only the man drew wages. The major was one of those ball-bearing-jawed talkers who could explain to you, so logically and irrefutably, that money grew on trees, that when you left his presence you caught yourself glancing over at a juniper to see if there weren't at least a couple of half-ripened four-bit pieces hanging there.

But he was bucking something when he talked sheep in this country. Old Tom Wadleigh, who had owned much of that worthless acreage before the company adopted it, stood up. He was a broad-shouldered old man in blue jeans and a leather shirt. His head was as clean and hard as a boiled doorknob.

"If sheep would be good there," he said, "they'd be better on good pasture, wouldn't they? And if they're worth more, like you say, why don't we sell all the cattle and raise sheep everywhere?"

Major Starkey smiled. "Tom, that almost makes sense. But I don't like to have all my eggs in one basket. That's why I say sheep *and* cattle."

Wadleigh hung on stubbornly. "Ike Farley's raising wheat on his land. That's a good spell north of mine and a sight worse. I ain't seen it for six weeks, but he still swore he'd make a crop."

Starkey chuckled. "That's Farley's Folly Farm you're talking about. A lot can happen to wheat in six dry weeks, Tom. This ain't wheat country. Pilar, you tell them about sheep."

A lean blade-faced Basque got up and somewhat sullenly and in shattered English talked about sheep. In the middle of it, a couple of horses pulled up outside. Tom Braga and the other cowboy from the ranch stomped in. Braga said something to Major Starkey. His voice began to rise, and suddenly Hollis Emory got up.

"Carlin, you say? Is Joe Carlin back?"

"Right here, Hollis," said Joe. A cow dropping through the roof wouldn't have attracted more attention.

They all turned to stare. Then the men were getting up and clumping back to shake their hands and pound them on the back. But their nervousness came out like red paint through a top-coat of white.

Starkey was coming down the aisle, trailed by Braga and the other pair. A rangy, middle-aged man, the major wore

a crisp gray mustache and flourishing sideburns. He looked solid and military, but had a little of the holy fire of the promoter in his eye. He put his hand out to Joe.

"This is a long-deferred pleasure."

"Let's defer it a little longer," Joe said. "When I get squared around, we can talk about shaking hands."

Starkey's eyes dug their front-line trenches. "Braga has told me there was some trouble over the ranch house. Naturally we'll vacate. The house and, say, five acres around it are yours. But the land down there—"

"How much have you got in this outfit?" Carlin snapped.

Starkey's jaws tensed. "I don't get your question."

"How many shares do you own in this kangaroo farm? How many votes will it take to throw you out the same window you came in?"

Hollis Emory cleared his throat again. He was a tall, pallid man, ossified with dignity. "Joe, have you got time to come over and talk to me for a minute or two?"

Carlin's anger was bursting out the seams of him. His eyes were black and hostile and his lips were bloodless. "I'll talk to you right here. You parlor soldiers with milk for blood and a knife for the backs of your friends! What were all of you doing while he sold us out? Cheering him on?"

"IT WAS hard to tell just where you thought your land did end, men. You kept books in your heads. It could have been clear down to Crooked River."

"Where does it end?" Starkey asked curiously.

It stopped Joe momentarily. He didn't know. His boundaries were—out there someplace. Always had been. "It don't make any damned—"

"You call yourself a soldier, do you?" Braga cut in sardonically. "Ever fight a battle without a final firing line?"

"Let's not go into military matters," Starkey said. "Suppose you draw up a list of complaints and submit them at the next business meeting."

Joe said doggedly, "I own everything between Seven-Dollar Creek and Cherry Creek. I'm making that my home place while I round up enough of those cows I

saw to pay me for the graze you've ruined."

Braga laughed. "Excuse him, folks," he said. "He's just chockful of vinegar after killing papooses and squaws for three years."

Maybe they bandied insults around for an hour before flaxing down to fighting, where Braga came from. Maybe that was why he just stood there and let Joe Carlin slam one into his mouth. Braga choked and sprawled back over a bench. His spurs glittered in the air for a moment and then he rolled over and came up on his hands and knees. Blood dripped darkly on the floor. Hollis Emory tried to hold Carlin back, but Joe cuffed him on the ear and he got out of the way. Braga lunged up and met Joe's attack solidly. He smashed at Carlin's chin and found his chest. It brought a dull drumbeat and made Joe cough. He caught Joe around the neck and applied strangling pressure. When the cowman threshed furiously, they fell among the benches.

Braga was a strong, aggressive man. He missed no bets and never jabbed when he could slug. He snorted like a cut stallion as they rolled about, overturning benches. His knuckles had marked Joe's face bruisingly by the time they broke and got up.

Hollis Emory was bouncing about, pleading, "Good Lord, boys! Good Lord—!"

Braga's left flashed. Carlin's head rocked and his head swam for an instant. The ramrod slipped inside and sank one into his belly. The driving impact set Joe Carlin back and turned everything green before his eyes. He went down with a stubborn scowl on his face, half-conscious. For a moment he lay sprawled, and heard Braga's throaty voice.

"The fighting squaw killer!"

One thing about privation and horse-meat: they were good for the insides. That belly punch would have laid Carlin out, three years ago. But the blood that pumped through him as he lay there was strong, resentful blood, and it carried off the sludge of darkness and cleared his head. He waited until he was ready. Then he came up in a rush and caught Braga napping. Feinting, he brought the foreman's guard down and slugged him on the

eye. Braga stumbled and doggedly came back. Holding the advantage for the first time, Joe heard them half-heartedly yelling for him. Their dollars were on Braga's side, but their sentiments were still with their own kind.

He shook Tom Braga with a hard right to the chin. Braga's eyes fogged. Joe linked his fingers behind the ramrod's neck and hauled his head down. At the same time, his knee rose and collided with the man's face. Braga groaned and reeled back. Joe stalked him, firing rights and lefts until the man turned and groped for a bench and, missing it, fell in the aisle.

Elmo struck Joe on the back and horse-faced Ad Kelly spat so close to Braga that the spittle splashed on his face. Carlin went up to Major Starkey and gathered his gray silk stock in his fist. "Even Grant knew when to retreat," he said, "and you don't look like Grant to me. I'm going down and take up ranching where I left off. Don't serve no papers on me or I'll shoot them and the servers full of fifty-caliber holes. Don't wear yourself out polishing medals, Major."

Starkey's silence was rigid, but thunderous as a storm cloud. Joe paused before Emory. "I'm going to need about a thousand dollars for some stock," he said. "You wouldn't care to take my place up as security?"

Emory cleared his throat. "Well, Joe, I just wish I could help. But I'm spread out thin, you know."

Joe laughed. "Kind of hard to back the challenger when you've got all your money on the champ, eh? Well, you'd better get some money up on me one of these days to cover your other bets."

Having made their brag, the heroes swaggered out.

Halfway back to his cabin on Seven-Dollar Creek, Joe Carlin camped that night in a brake of serviceberry. He was at the ranch by ten o'clock and found Braga and Rinehard, the puncher, had already moved out. The small rock cabin had not been swept in years. Food splattered the walls about the sheet-iron stove. It had been treated as a line shack.

ENTERING it was an emotional shock. So many things he had forgotten—the antelope prongs that served as a

closet; on the floor, the hide of the bear he had killed on Muddy Creek; the little kitchen table at which he used to figure and eat and dream. And standing there in the rubble of squirrel litter and trash, he had the damndest impulse to break down and bawl. All the years of labor that were like prayer. Prayer to a god who recognized ambition and good intentions and rewarded them. They rose in a suffocating cloud about him until he scuffed out of the cabin and tramped down to the corral.

Everything was snarled up now. He was sorry it had started with so much rannikaboo. Slow and easy his dad used to preach that, but Joe was ambitious, impatient, and unthorough. By the act of recording his claim, he might have prevented all the trouble. But that did not alter the fact that the land was still his. In sudden, angry decision, he made up a camp kit, saddled his horse again, and started out on a little private roundup.

He followed the creek down its shallow valley. The country was in fall tweeds, tan and gold and brown. The way the graze looked, two hundred cows wouldn't repay him for the damage. He decided on three. Setting out in a businesslike way, he began working fat grassers toward a stone corral. That first day he branded forty and started them back into the hip-pockets of his range. He worked fast, busting the steers hard and slapping his Wineglass on, with a smaller one on the shoulder as a vent brand.

For two more days he took his pick of the Rafter S herd. On the third evening, as he was cooking up a mess of sonofagun in a black iron kettle, Tennessee Utley rode in. It was cold. She wore a red and gray Indian blanket as a coat and an old hat of her father's. She swung down, let the blanket slide to the ground and flipped off the hat, and stood there in divided leather skirt and an old gray sweater, stretching her hands to catch the surging redness of the fire. Joe poked another stick of juniper under the kettle and grinned up at her.

"Mind drinking your coffee out of a tomato can, papoose?"

"I was brought up to think that was putting on airs."

He filled one can with a hot stew of

kidney, liver, and tripe. "This ain't like the cooking you get at the Utley place," he said.

The girl looked about her at the signs of branding. Dusk was descending coldly over the camp. "I see you meant it."

"How'd you find me?"

"Injun trick. Anybody else could find you, too. You aren't giving them much chance to make peace, are you?"

"They didn't seem interested in peace the other day. The damn', short-pod, ungrateful—"

"They aren't ungrateful, Joe. You just caught them out on a limb. They always said there'd have to be an adjustment when you came back. They knew they were using some of your land and intended to pay for the use of it."

"They didn't say anything about that the other day."

"Did you give them a chance? No! You just started swinging."

Carlin somehow did not mind her chiding. She was sincere and level-headed, and he liked her. Darkness had gathered about them until they were marooned on a small island of warmth and light. The thought brought a warm tingling.

"What are they aiming to do?"

"What do you think? Starkey's sworn out a cease and desist against you. Pop tried to talk him out of it, the way he tried to talk them out of the company idea."

"He do that?"

"Yes, and in your interest. He could have talked you into some better luck than this, too, if you'd have listened."

Sitting there at his side, she regarded him indignantly. Joe placed his hand over hers. "Why do you care whether I get rich or they run me out on a rail?"

Her lower lip was unsteady, but she gave her chin a proud little tilt. "Oh, you know about me, don't you? Didn't they used to josh you about your squaw sweetheart?"

Her frankness took him off-balance. "They'll kid about 'most anything. They aren't calling you 'squaw' anymore, I'll bet."

"But you are. In your heart. I'll always be a Cayuse girl, won't I? You'd never have anything to do with a girl like me."

Then she came as close to crying as

she ever could, probably. Her lips quivered but held firm, and the tears brimmed over. She turned her head quickly, burying her face against his shoulder. He was stirred breathlessly by some complicated emotions. "Why, honey!" he said.

Because it seemed like a good idea, he kissed her. He felt her body melt against his, and he pulled her onto his lap and kissed her.

It was an awkward position for a man to be caught in. But suddenly it got through to Joe that someone else was in on this. He turned quickly, hearing brush snap. He heard a man try to settle himself quickly in the serviceberry thicket beyond the fire; heard him command:

"Just stay there, Romeo! Just keep that hand—"

Joe picked him out. In the tangle of brush, he saw the dark fox-face of the puncher who had ridden with Braga that day—Cal Rinehard. Joe sat up straight. He let his hand cover the bone grips of his Colt. "Come on out," he said. "Come out, or—"

Rinehard's face flinched. Joe knew the signal. He flung himself flat, away from Tennessee, tugging his gun clear. A rifle thundered shatteringly. The fire was dynamited over Joe's clothing and the ground beyond. He arched his thumb back across the hammer and let it fall.

Cal Rinehard rose and took a step toward the fire. He buckled over in the middle and lay writhing in slow agony.

CHAPTER 3 *Gun Down the Deputy*

Carlin found his horse a quarter-mile away, beside Tennessee's. He brought them in. He lashed the puncher across the saddle, tied the reins about the pommel, and gave the horse a lick with a rope. It ran clattering up the canyon. He turned to Tennessee. She was silent and frightened.

"Get out," he said. "I never saw you after that day at your house."

She held the lapels of his jacket. "Joe, they'll come after you! Go back with me. Let them lock you up and leave it to Pop and me to square it with the sheriff."

Joe picked her up and swung her into

the saddle. "So long, honey," he said. He gave the pony a lash of the rope and she had to hold on as it took off across the canyon.

He spent another half day at the camp, but logic finally had its way with him. Better to ride in than let them come after him. He pointed for town. Well, there wasn't much to worry about. He had Tennessee for a witness, if it came to hanging talk.

Cross Hollows knew about it. As he entered town that cold late afternoon, he saw the thronged wagons and racked horses. The community hall was bulging with ranchers, farmers and their families, and cowboys strolled the walks. Quite a showing for a simple, uncomplicated murder. J. D. Sexton, the feed and fuel merchant, doubled as sheriff, and Carlin jogged directly to his store just beyond the Pastime. A sensation of uneasiness touched him. He was glad to reach the store and dismount. He was standing with the reins still in his hands when a rifle report shook the street. A man stepped out of the deep shadows before the saloon with a carbine in his hands. It was Pilar Corta, Starkey's sheep specialist. Corta came on a trot towards him, shouting.

"I got him, boys! Carlin!"

Joe stood in silent contempt as Corta came up. Sexton tramped out of the store with a Colt in his hand. Carlin turned and finished tying his horse. By that time, men were streaming up the road from the community hall and saloons. Even Elmo and Ad were there, still poking around town hunting steam to start ranching on. They looked sour and defeated. Sexton made a great business of disarming him, a big-fisted Scot who believed in a wide-open town, but would tolerate no gunplay. Major Starkey ran up, blowing a little. There was the look on him of a hunter who has come upon a deer he was certain he had missed.

He stared at Carlin, shaking his head. "I heard your threat, Carlin, but I never thought you meant *this*."

Joe grunted. "I gather that load of wolf-bait I sent in made it to town."

"To the stage road," Sexton stated. "Killin' a deppity! What the hell's got into you, son? You're outa the army, now."

A small finger of cold rippled down

Joe's back. "Deputy? He came coyotin' around my camp and threw down on me. I pulled a gun and he fired. I fired back, but I happened to tally."

Starkey's eyes were level and accusative. "He was carrying a legal notice. An injunction against your brand-blotting."

Joe said, "A warrant in his pocket, but a gun in his hand. I stand on a man's rights to protect his house and camp, Sheriff."

Sexton sighed. "Joe, he had a warrant in his pocket when he left, but it was gone when I got to him. Looked like it's been delivered."

Carlin looked at Starkey, comprehending. One of Starkey's crowd had got to Rinehard first. And Rinehard's mission had not been to serve the paper, but to kill, and claim he had been fired on. Suddenly Joe lunged at the major. Starkey fell back; Joe's fist chopped across his chin. Then Sexton, Corta and several others lowered the boom and Joe went down under their massed weight.

The jail was a cold stone tank with one barred window. It was placed on a back street paralleling the main street. Just after dark Judge Myron Utley came to it. Joe stood at the window, smoking. He was incapable of caring much. Happiness now seemed to involve less what was going to happen to him, and more what was going to happen to other people. Utley combed his beard with his hand, morosely shaking his head.

"Joe, do you want to tell me about it?"

"It's the same as I told Sexton."

"There weren't any witnesses?"

"No."

"Not even Tennessee?"

Carlin flicked his cigarette through the strap-iron bars. "Who's going to believe an Injun girl over circumstantial evidence?"

"Probably nobody. But a good lawyer can get you out of this, especially with me sitting on the case. I can get Phil Cornelius down from The Dalles. But I'd want a promise from you."

Carlin raised his brows.

"Tennessee," said the judge. "She's my girl, Joe. The finest girl in town, but not fine enough for even the lowest-grade cowpuncher in Shoshone County. A half-breed. She's in love with you, Joe. I don't

know who's responsible for her going out to see you. But I want your promise that you'll leave her alone if I get you off. She'll get over it. I don't want her heart mangled any worse than it has been."

CARLIN shook his head. "Have you taken a good look at her lately? She could have any man she wanted. Most of them would marry her in a minute."

"Would you?"

"Why—I don't know." He knew one thing: He would not have it bandied around that Joe Carlin married her to save his neck. "No," he said, "I guess I wouldn't. Not the day I got off."

"It would be that day or none," Utley said. "Maybe you'd like to promise to leave her alone, then?"

"Lord A'Mighty," Joe said. "You can't throw a couple of propositions like that at a man and expect any kind of answer!"

Utley moved off. "However, I do. Think about it."

And a little later Major Orlando Starkey came through the darkness quietly, to stand with his hands in his pockets outside the window and call softly, "Carlin."

Joe was already at the window, invisible in the gloom. "What's your proposition?" he said.

Starkey hesitated. "What makes you think I have a proposition?"

"I think you'd be dead before you missed."

There was a hard urgency about the major. He gave the impression of a man determined to untangle a knot if he could without cutting it, but about ready to pull out the knife. He said tersely:

"You're not a stupid man, just impetuous. You've made things tough for all of us. If you'd given us time, we'd have taken care of you fairly. This is the last offer I'm going to make."

He waited for Joe to speak, but Joe didn't. He settled his shoulders and moved a little closer. "In a legal way, you're in bad shape. That injunction. I don't know what happened to it, but it looks bad. The only way for you to be sure of not hanging is not to be around for the trial. I can get you out of here. I'll provide a fast horse and a sack of food. And there'll be two hundred dollars in the

saddlebag for you. How about it, Joe?"

"You wouldn't care to move closer for a minute, would you? I could answer you best that way. So I walk out of here, get on a horse, and Pilar Corta or you or Braga makes a hero of himself by shooting me in the back! I'm working up a mouthful of spit, Major; I'd back out of range if I was you."

Starkey's face was hard as cement in the faint moonlight. "Then, I wash my hands of you. You can take the breaks as they come." He turned on his heel and strode away.

Then it was as though everybody had forgotten him, and he and the little stone jail were alone. He liked it better that way.

Long after midnight boots crunched carefully in the earth and he saw hands come through the bars. "Who is it?" he demanded.

"Shut up! it's me, Elmo. Ad's with the horses. We're going for a ride. Coming along?"

Joe bounced up. "Why, I might," he said. "You know who you're going with?"

"I know who I damn' well wouldn't stay with. These milk-fed Cross Hollow farmers. Double Cross Hollow, far as we're concerned! Leave a man fight a war for them and rob him blind. H'ist this rope to the top of the window and mash it back through the bars, will you?"

Joe did. Elmo completed the truss. Someone else came up and Elmo turned swiftly. "Ad?" he whispered.

Tennessee Utley joined him at the window. Elmo was knocked loose of his tongue. "How foolish do you think people are around here?" the girl complained. "I've been watching you pad around for an hour. I've got my horse waiting over there in the junipers. I'm going with you."

"One thing we ain't taking," Elmo said, "is a woman."

"Get these bars yanked loose, will you?" Joe said. When the cowman strode away to mount his horse he reached out and gripped her hands. "You're the best ever, Tennessee. Too good to hit the hide-out trail with anybody. Maybe I'll make some money in gold mining and buy me a lawyer and jury."

"And what, Joe?" Her face was bright.

"Expose myself to you and see if I've really caught it, like I think I have. Did you know the judge was over here?"

"No! What did he say?"

"He knew you were at the camp. How'd he find out?"

"I told him. I told him I was going to testify for you, and he said it would only make it worse. So I'm going along with you."

He shook his head.

"Either I go along or you listen to me!" she flared. "The stockholders are holding a meeting tomorrow. That's why everybody's in town. Pop told them they can legally vote Starkey out of office and decide what they want to do about you. Joe, wait for that, won't you?"

"THIS may be my last chance to get out of here. You think I'd throw that over on the long chance that they'll vote themselves into bankruptcy to give me a lift? Go on home," he said.

She squeezed his hand. "Home is where we camp from now on." She turned and ran silently toward the junipers.

Joe called softly and urgently to Elmo. "Get that nag moving, will you?"

As he spoke, the rope tightened and he felt the bars stir. The horse lunged again and the grille lifted from its cement foundation and thudded against the ground. Joe swung through the window. From a shed at the left, Ad Kelly came at a lope with a lead horse. Joe ran to meet him and vaulted into the saddle. They cut through town at a hard lope.

It was the glumest escape a man ever made. They rode all night, making thirty miles by sunup. They built a fire and boiled coffee. "Hear about the meeting for today?" Ad queried.

"Yep. Don't expect any good of it."

"Guess not," Ad said.

Elmo hesitated. "There was just a chance them farmers mought have come around."

"Listen," Joe said. "There's no reason you two can't go back. Who's to prove you busted me out? I expect you did it because you thought I'd like it that way. Well, I did, but—"

A small rat of regret nibbled at his ease. Impatience, again. Taking the quickest

way, when the slowest might have been best. Suppose they did vote to give them back all their land and make restitution for the lost graze. But that was mere wool-gathering.

"Thing about them," Elmo Blucher growled, "is that all the worthless ranches are holding down the good ones. Maybe sheep would be the answer." He looked about. "This is Farley's place, ain't it? It's sheep pasture, all right."

They topped a smooth hogback and stopped in amazement. From a shallow, sprawling valley beyond, a distant clatter rose to them. The ground was yellow with stubble. Far down the line a threshing machine was being operated by a team of horses. Farther still a mower was clattering over a hill. "Wheat!" Joe said. "Thought Starkey said it wouldn't grow here."

They sat there five minutes, watching the harvest pageant of reaping, threshing, sacking. "But they never tried it before, that I knew of," said Elmo.

Ad Kelly scratched his chin. "And they were just waiting for him to blow his brains out over the crop failure!"

They rode down to the threshing area and a big overalled man with a red handkerchief over his nose and mouth came up, tugging the bandana down. "Shore could use you, boys!" he said. "I got the damndest load of wheat here a man ever raised! Now I got the rains to beat. Payin' four bucks a day."

"Sorry," Joe said. "Can't use work, but I'll pay you ten dollars for a sack of wheat."

The farmer went along with the joke. "Eat it here or take it with you?"

Joe gave him two half-eagles and lugged a sack over to his horse. He lashed it on and faced Farley again. "Going to clear expenses this year?"

Farley's eyes lighted up. He raised his arms. "Boys, this pays me for ten years of losing money trying to raise cattle on sagebrush!"

the afternoon. A woman pushing a baby-buggy stopped to stare at them. Some men in front of the Pastime gasped. Horses and rigs clustered about the community hall at the end of the street; the meeting was still in progress. Carlin dismounted and untied the sack of wheat. Followed by the others, he walked inside with chiming spurs. The place was half full. Major Orlando Starkey was on his feet before the crowd. Judge Utley and two other men were standing in the shareholders section. Sheriff Sexton, sitting near the door, slowly came onto his feet.

Carlin dumped the sack on the floor and gashed it open with his spur. He raised a double handful of wheat and let it spill in a dusty-gold stream. "I'm casting my vote," he said. "If you can't make up your minds whether to take your hands out of my pockets or not, maybe this will help. This came from Farley's Folly Farm. He's flatboating tons of the stuff to Portland. He says he'll be rich before he's through threshing. He raised it on the same kind of land that's dragging you down."

Starkey was looking past Joe. "You see your man, don't you?" he said to Sexton.

"I hear him, too," the sheriff said. "Tall it for us, Joe."

Haggard with weariness, Carlin shrugged. "All that land north of town is the same as Farley's. Wheat land. Columbia wheat. It's going to be in every loaf of bread on the Coast. You can let the wheat men out and make a go of the livestock side. Or leave things as they are.

"In other words," Joe concluded, "I'm buying my land back for a sack of wheat. Your loyalty comes so high I won't try to buy that. Sheriff, if you've got that window cemented back, let's go. Judge Utley's bringing me a lawyer from The Dalles."

Utley came through the silent, overalled ranchers on the benches. "Joe," he said, "you wouldn't trust 'em farther than you could kick a cow, would you? I told you you couldn't stampede them into your line of thinking. But even after you got out, they did what I said they would. You're late for the voting. It's already finished—though some of them," he said,

Joe pointed his horse toward Cross Hollow.

They entered the town about three in

with a glance at Starkey, "are asking for a recount. You and the others get your land and they got up a purse of two hundred dollars to pay for the time you've lost."

Carlin sat down. Shame rushed in to fill all the cells left empty by the draining-off of resentment. Then he got up again and groined, "Well boys, I—I don't—"

Major Starkey came to life. He yanked his flat black hat from the table and set it squarely on his head. Pilar Corta and Tom Braga rose from a bench.

"I'm turning in my shares for cash," Starkey said. "Wheat, sheep, or skunk cabbage. If you're going to manage the outfit with tears in your eyes and a dollar for every panhandler, you're going under!"

They heard him turn his horse into the road a minute later. Joe turned to Sexton. "I guess the next is on you."

"It's a funny thing," the sheriff said. "That legal paper of Rinehard's never got to my office. We searched your camp, too. And without it, there's no evidence that he did anything but ramp down on you out there. No witnesses, either."

"That sounds reasonable," Carlin said. *No witnesses.* It put him in mind of Tennessee, and suddenly all this fuss about land and shares and suchlike packed down to about the value of a rusty spur-tine. He made a little thanks for all three of them, shook hands with Utley and Sexton, and walked out.

She was waiting in the judge's parlor, doing some fancy-work, like any well-brought up young woman. When she saw him, she rose, letting the work fall to the carpet.

"Oh, Joel Joel!"

Judge Utley came in an hour before sundown with liquor on his breath. He was high enough to speak bluntly.

"I told you it'd be one or t'other. Which is it going to be? Because I love her, Carlin, and nobody that don't is going to set by her on any sofa of mine."

Tennessee held up her hand to show him a ring nearly big enough for a bracelet for a light-boned outfit like her. Utley's mouth trembled in the stained mat of gray beard. "Stand up," he said.

He got the Book and took the ring off



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her finger. He went through it right there, forged the name of a couple of witnesses, and said:

"Now, I've done my duty by you. I educated you and got you a man. It's all squared. And damned if I don't almost wish it wasn't."

Joe shook his hand and kissed his bride. Tennessee whispered in his ear, "Mrs. Sexton was telling me, Joe, they're never any redder than the mother or the father!"

"They can wear war-bonnets if they want," Joe said happily. "Well, I've got to get out there."

Her face fell. "To the ranch?"

"Got to shovel the trash out and boil the stove in lye before I take a wife home. Give me three days."

"But, Joe—!"

He walked out on her pleas. He rode south down the county road, making for the Wineglass. He did not know how fast Starkey would ride, but perhaps he could catch him. One of the things he wanted to clean up was the major. He wanted to make it plain that he was all through stirring up hornets' nests.

The tracks of three ponies were in the road. The pocks in the road dust indicated they had been walking. Joe had taken Utley's horse, because his own was played-out. He varied the pace, but it amounted to a good cavalry clip. Peering ahead along the road winding through the shallow canyon-bottoms, crusted at each side with brush and rock, he did not notice the change in the tracks.

At just that moment, his horse wheeled with a frightened squeal and he was nearly thrown from the saddle. The gunshot was close and shattering. The bullet struck the stock of his saddle gun and Joe's hand, resting on it, was numbed.

THE horse was pitching and squealing. He made a poor target, so that by the time the men in the brush got off a shot or two, he had plunged into the serviceberry at the foot of a long slope to the right and dived from the saddle. A man came into sight from behind a juniper. The gunstock was ragged against Carlin's shoulder. He let the shot go and this man, Pilar Corta, was knocked back by the impact.

Two other guns opened up. They created particular hell with things around Carlin. He lay as flat as he could behind a ragged brown shoulder of lava.

Joe snaked his gun up for a look at the men across the road. A ball struck six inches from his face and pain gashed redly through his eyeballs. For a moment he thought he had been blinded. His vision swam. Then he found the deep cut above his eye and squeezed his handkerchief against it.

A new sound intruded—a horse running hard. There was an end to the firing. Joe could just hear the rider's voice—Tennessee! He filled his lungs and shouted back:

"Cross the creek! Get behind that ridge and pour it to them!"

The horse ran again. The brush cracked, and this time Joe got a quick one away. He levered another shell up; a deep affection filled him for this new brass-bound Henry, the only thing he had got out of the army that was worth a damn. Load it Sunday and fire all week. The pony was behind the ridge and moving daintily among loose volcanic rubble. Then it stopped moving. A few moments later a Winchester cracked viciously. Tom Braga began to shout.

"She hit me, Major! The gal hit me! Lord, Major, I—I'm hurt."

He floundered out onto the road, holding his elbow. Joe, with lazy care, pulled a bead on his chest. Braga wasn't hurting when he went down. A tight silence gripped the spot where Orlando Starkey still lay in ambush.

Starkey suddenly appeared on the road. He ran straight at Joe, firing as he came. He emptied the carbine and raised it above his head like a club as he vaulted over the rock. Joe fired point-blank. Starkey's face writhed. He landed on Joe and they sprawled together. Joe quickly rolled clear. But Orlando Starkey lay still.

After a while Joe took a long breath and stepped into the road. He waved and called her name, and presently saw her come over the ridge leading the pony, a slim, colorful figure in red mackinaw and dark skirt. Mrs. Joe Carlin! It was going to be all right, Joe thought. Yes, sir, just about right!

Next

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

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The pretty senorita warned Bob Dubrow and Paco Nogales to leave Los Reyes. But, bucking continuous trouble since they bought their border ranch, they were determined to re-sell it to Falt Gray.



The two ranchers were picked up by Marshal Jake Feers, who claimed they had killed John Rawlis in cold blood. Dubrow swung at the marshal and escaped with Nogales toward their ranch, Tres Conchas.



A dozen armed riders suddenly surrounded Dubrow's ranch house. "We want the girl," one called out. Bob Dubrow thumbed back the hammer of his Colt and yelled out the window. "Come on in an' get her, then."



The huge form of rancher Scott Harris loomed beside him. Dubrow lashed at Harris just as the captive senorita screamed. . . . The complete story will be told in Robert L. Trimmell's novelette—"Border Blood Comes High!"

QUEEN OF THE LEDGES

Trapped on the ledge, the big-game hunter faced the wounded grizzly—with an empty gun.



By

TOM ROAN

JUDGED by any code, it was unfair from the beginning to the end. It was no spot in the first place for a sensible grizzly to start a fight with another of almost equal strength, reach and weight. A misstep to westward would

Benton was caught off balance.

have carried either one of them off the high ledge in the great cliffs.

But Old Powder Face held the advantage here, and was going to hold it for sheer cursedness that seemed to be always gnawing at her grizzly bones. The ledge meandering up the face of the cliffs from the valley below had taken an abrupt rise here, a dangerous ten-foot slant, and Old Powder Face stood at the top of it, more than a thousand pounds of mean-eyed fury.

Mamook, always before this the queen of the ledges, stood below. Chunky, her cub, crouching and crying behind her, wondering why she did not go right on up and throw Old Powder Face into the river with a single blow of a great forepaw.

It had been going on for more than an hour in the quiet and cool November afternoon. A great, brooding stillness seemed to have settled everywhere over those towering Montana Rockies. Other animals of the wild had been watching it from the distance, especially two huge lynx cats just inside the mouth of their den high up on the timbered ridge walling the western side of the deep valley. Each cat hoping for the best—and the best could be only with one of the great bears making a slip and falling to furnish easy meat at the river's edge.

The noise of the crying and wailing, the growling and smacking had gone far. A big bull-moose stared down from the safety of the timbered back of the ridge, a six-point buck standing a couple of hundred feet below, neither aware of each other being there.

Mamook had tried to go up many times. Old Powder Face had been waiting for just that, right or left paw ready. She had struck many times, her terrific blows enough to crush a full-grown stallion's skull or knock such a puny thing as a man's head off his shoulders. Mamook had grown dizzy with it, cut on the face and her thick-boned skull by the raking claws, the blood seeping down her battle-scarred old muzzle.

Not once had she been able to pull herself high enough to deliver a return blow, always having to use both forefeet to help pull herself up over this abrupt rise.

Old Powder Face must have known that she was on forbidden territory. This

particular ledge had belonged to old Mamook for years. She had been forced into a score of fights here with other wild animals, and even men and guns and dogs who came every fall in the hunting season.

Up this same ledge was the old den, a full mile above the river, and Old Powder Face had no right on the ledge except for the fact that her bulk and weight and powerful fighting ability usually took her any place she wanted to go. In this place she seemed to be hell-bent on establishing herself as the bully of the ledges.

She had been that on her own range in the higher reaches of the mountains, especially on the north side of Old Baldy, the shining, snow-crowned mountain dome above the head of the valley. Having never been whipped by another bear in all her life it was as natural to expect the best of it here.

Threatening in her best grizzly language, Mamook tried for it again, and it was the same. A terrific stroke caught her on the side of the head, knocking her off her feet this time. Had she gone to her right she might have slithered right on over the lip of the ledge, but the right paw-blow had knocked her to the left, hard against the face of the rocks and down into a deeper, darker daze.

Old Powder Face might have finished it then and there by quickly coming down and catching her victim before she could get back to her feet, but she was too smart to chance that. Once downed but able to rise at the last moment, a grizzly always flung back into it as exploding and striking lightning, often fighting with more fury than ever.

But this time Mamook had a change of heart. Even a grizzly could finally understand when something was utterly impossible. Bleeding around the mouth, the nose and ears, Chunky, the cub crying behind her, she turned to go back down the ledge, not licked by a long shot, not going to be licked, but going to yet settle it by going up another ledge and getting over and behind Old Powder Face and Impy. Impy was on up the ledge, watching his big mother do all the fighting and apparently taking the keenest of enjoyment out of it.

Quarreling out of one side of her mouth, crying out of the other, Mamook gave Chunky a slap astern, heading him on

down the ledge. In her rolling gait she kept one eye cocked back over her shoulder, aching for Old Powder Face to pick up courage enough to come down off the rise so that she could wheel and have it out here and now.

Old Powder Face showed no sign of coming. She stood there bear-grinning and growling, knowing that she had had the best of it. But Mamook had not gone seventy feet before other things were happening with startling rapidity—popping, wailing, crying and glancing things slapping the rocks above her, showering down bits of broken stone, a splattering, crashing sound coming from the distance, a wild baying and yapping from both down and up the ledge.

Guns! Mamook and Old Powder Face each had had their meeting with them. The baying and yapping meant dogs suddenly released and hurrying into it, going to hold both bears there on the ledge until their masters could finish them off with high-powered rifles from a safe distance far on the other side of the river.

Old Powder Face wheeled, starting to go hog-jumping back up the ledge toward her startled and wailing Impy, Mamook and her cub forgotten, all the glory of bullying gone out of her. Showering rock in her face stopped her so quickly her hind feet shot out, sprawling out at either side of the forelegs and letting her come squashing down on the ledge.

IMPY had stopped at the same time, not knowing the meaning of these things flying so hellishly around him, these things he could not see, that came from the other side of the river, wailing, crying, whining, whistling and smashing. Not yet hurt but feeling that the world was falling on him, he wheeled back to his mother, the big, ugly fighting thing that always settled his troubles.

Old Powder Face was a little too slow for the cub in her turning. When the cub saw that she seemed to be turning her rump toward him instead of reaching for him with her great, protecting forearms, he hog-jumped on behind her, and was suddenly in the lead—and going to keep that lead. He struck the lip of the slope in the ledge, and was immediately going down, the old bear having to follow him.

Mamook saw it all back over her shoulder, but there was no time to halt here now and finish up the squabble. Chunky was still ahead, having sense enough to keep going like sixty, and Mamook kept after him until an inward bend in the ledge took them behind a protecting wall of rock on the rim of it. Now the bullets could not get at them, but the dogs seemed to be coming up the ledge and would soon have to be faced head-on and wiped out at once—a simple thing for a grizzly to do if she could only get close enough to them.

But it was Chunky that changed everything. Scared out of his wits, he turned into a break in the rocks, and headed upward, still wailing his woes. Mamook had never been up the break. Neither had the cub—and neither knew where it would take them. But there was only one thing for an old she-grizzly to do, and that was to keep her cub in sight—especially now with all hell suddenly falling on them and no chance to make it a decent fight.

Men never gave a grizzly that chance if they could help it. Their coming was always just the same, some situation like this; a bear probably busy on the high places, often up above the timberlines rolling over great stones and busy feeding herself and her cub on the fat gophers she was finding in their bared burrows below the rocks, or picking berries down along the river—and all of a sudden the thoroughly unexpected crashing, popping, glancing and wailing or drilling her through as high-powered bullets came from the distance.

After that it was the race for safety, often a battle with dogs, and sometimes a last charge with indomitable fury until the bear was dropped for the last time, unable to rise again.

And this was another one of those times. Both old bears were scarred by bullets that had cried and wailed for them in the past; both knew that the only thing for them here was death unless they made good their escape, the infernal dogs due to nag them all the way, to come in just close enough to nip them from behind, springing away when they had them stopped, smart enough to keep out of range of the lightning forepaws—until men could come up.

Like Mamook, there seemed nothing

that Old Powder Face could do but follow the lumbering, quarreling big bear and her Chunky, Impy following Mamook, believing without a doubt in the safety of numbers when it would have been much better if they could have scattered immediately.

Mamook had to keep going. There was no turning back now. Chunky had picked a place too narrow in stretches for his huge mother to follow right behind him. Here and there she had to turn aside and scramble up to the right or left.

In this place and that she put herself in the open again, inviting more bullets to whistle and pop around her from the distance. The faint voices of men could now be heard yelling to the dogs and other men east of the river who seemed to be waiting on top of the cliff, north of them on the abruptly rising slopes of Old Baldy or watching from down the valley below the foot of the many ledges.

It was a nip and tuck business, the noise and excitement growing by the second, the dogs getting closer and closer below. No dog could get far up this break in the rocks, but they could be made to swing back and try to meet the bears above or below.

And here were four bears instead of the usual one or two—four *grizzlies*! And grizzlies were the prizes of the high places, sought by most hunters for their great skins to decorate floors as rugs, and tales to tell grandchildren.

But the bears knew nothing about it,

nothing about the higher arts of big-game hunting. This was get away and out of it. Old Powder Face was not looking for trouble now, her spatting of Mamook forgotten, fear taking the place of everything else—and more fear and a slap of pain hit her as she followed the lumbering Mamook over another high place that brought them back into the open.

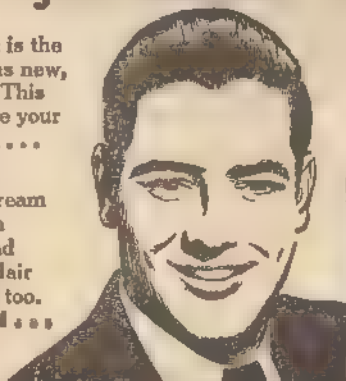
Two bullets had ripped across Old Powder Face. Almost at the same time a second far-crying bullet smacked her thick skull and slapped away in the rocks. Neither wound meant anything to a tough old grizzly, but they made her furious. She could not turn back, could not leave that damnable Impy, knowing that he would never get out of this alive if left alone.

Chunky reached the top first, going up and under a great slab of rock that put a protecting roof overhead, the crack wider here. On top there were low pines and great rocks, the perfect hiding place from the men below, but not a place where they could stay. Hunters and dogs would soon be here, and Mamook kept going, her growls swinging Chunky to the north, the direction she always followed when guns started crashing. Old Baldy was up there and beyond Old Baldy would be the deep and dark regions. There the canyons and narrow gorges were deep, many of them choked with great piles and tangles of timber through which even a bear would have to struggle to find her way. Dogs would not be able to follow, and rare was

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the hunter who would poke his head into such holes, knowing that a grizzly was probably waiting just beyond the next dark bend.

Still feeling the blows, sensing the drip of blood and the maddening humiliation, Old Powder Face had lammed down on her head. Mamook started to turn and finish the quarrel here and now.

A startled little whimper from Chunky changed her mind. At once she saw trouble staring at them from a brand-new source—an old skunk and four kittens. Chunky had smashed into them twice in the past, knowing no better, and twice had cured him forever. Most grizzlies learned early in life to give the skunk the right of way.

Chunky turned aside, avoiding the old cat and the kittens entirely. Mamook did the same, snarling at them from the side of her mouth, but making no sound about it. With Impy it was different. As if not even interested in the rest of the trouble befalling them, he pushed himself straight into it, a terrible growl of warning from his mother failing to stop him, then the cub was falling back, pawing at his eyes, wailing his woes to the skies. His mother whammed him down on the rump, spitting him a dozen feet, and made him keep on after Mamook. Then, just a short time later, it turned to baying and howling dogs ahead, the encouraging voices of men rising somewhere beyond them.

With Chunky dropping back close to her, Mamook met the first three senseless brutes with the usual dynamite packed by every grizzly that walked the mountains. She caught the first lunging brute with a wide-open right paw-stroke.

She caught the second and third with right and left strokes, killing them on the spot. By this time Old Powder Face was up alongside, just to the left, Impy behind her. Side by side the great old bears moved on through the din of hell at either side and falling in behind them, dogs trying to make them halt and wait.

EVEN the scrap on the ledge below was forgotten now. This was a strict business proposition, a game with life or death as the stake. Old Powder Face hooked Impy forward with a quick swish of her right hind foot, placing him be-

tween herself and Mamook. Mamook kept to the rocks, the low brush and trees, still heading for Old Baldy, white and shining up there above the timberline, a beacon of safety for any hard-pressed bear, never moved by gunfire of excitement in the world below.

All the shooting had stopped long before this. Only the hellish dogs were to be fought here, and as long as the growling and quarreling bears could keep to the brush and rocks, men in the background would have little chance of getting shots at them.

They were forced to a halt many times before they reached the timberline. Both old bears whirled, nipped by the smarter dogs from behind, those dogs immediately wheeling and fleeing to a safe distance each time the dirty work was done, the pack of howling brutes growing steadily until there were no less than thirty of them. Out of that thirty no more than a dozen of them were real bear-dogs.

Those hard-trained to this business never took foolish chances, and the little ones seemed the worst, as sly and sharp as attacking weasels about it, dashing through cracks in the rocks where not even a cub could go, then coming out on top of the rocks ahead and high enough to be out of an upward rake of a lightning paw to nag and nag, yip and yowl, anything to make a bear stop and try to fight, thus delaying her for the bullets due to come up and pull her down.

It was dangerous above the timberline. Up here all vegetation left off almost immediately. Beyond the brush there was open ground, bare slopes without rocks high enough to afford a shadow of protection—places where many a grizzly had died in the past.

Mamook had been here before, had felt the slap of high-powered rifle balls on these same slopes. With Old Powder Face wanting to lunge straight on, she swung to the right, herding Chunky almost between her forelegs, going to see that she took him through or died in the trying.

With Old Powder Face and Impy out there in the open, the rifles were again opening up, bullets crying on the slope, little geysers of dust spurting up from the rocks. Before the older bear and the cub had gone seventy yards Impy was letting

out a sudden wail of pain and terror.

He came flopping back, rolled over on his right side, then over and over in a spin down a sharp rise. For a second or two it looked as if he was down for good. Old Powder Face rushed back to him, a devil now on her hind feet, both great forepaws lifted.

But Impy came up, either because he was afraid of his own mother with that terrifying look in her ugly face or because he realized that he had to get elsewhere in a hurry with bullets still crying and slapping the rocks around them. He came charging back down the slope, running now on three legs, a buck-jumping, ugly-fuzzy thing, every bristle lifted, the right foreleg broken as he headed for the calmer Mamook and her whimpering Chunky.

Behind the bears now men were pushing up on horseback. Among them, head and ears above them on a tall iron-gray, rode Mr. Kennewick Benton, a real big-game hunter, six feet four, two hundred and seventy pounds—and afraid of no animal that ever walked.

Like many who came to the Rockies he had shot tigers in the hot jungles of India, lions in Africa, elephants, gorillas and rhinos. Nothing stopped him, nothing made him give trail, not with a special-made London rifle that could stop a ten-ton bull-elephant with a single bullet.

Benton saw the blood, and he heard the dogs. Rifle ready, his big figure tall and straight in the stirrups, he set out after the noise, his keen blue eyes watching everything, seeing everything. Rocks down here close to the timberline hid both bear and dog, but there was brush also, and by the wavering tops of the bushes he could see where the bears were trying to go. He shouted orders for the others to keep back, and started out to cut the bears off, knowing that he could down all four of them from seventy or eighty yards with his powerful rifle.

Mamook might have charged at any other time. The notion went racing through her mind several times, and it was Chunky that probably saved her life without ever knowing it. A mother could not leave her cub, could not desert him here to the yapping and snapping dogs, knowing that he was yet small enough to be pulled down. She kept after him, Old

Powder Face and Impy following, the older bear snarling, the cub too scared to do anything but run.

HITTING back into deeper brush and rocks, Mamook managed to round Old Baldy, shots tearing at her several times, dead dogs strewn behind her, Old Powder Face getting her chance to kill one now and then. At last they were going down, off an abrupt rim and on a dangerous slope. Here, the dogs in all their excitement were stumbling, feet flying from under one here and there, letting the brute tumble for yards down the slope, his terrorized wailing lifting to the rest of the din.

Sliding, stumbling and falling herself, Chunky likewise, the same with the old mother bear and her cub behind them, Mamook finally reached the foot of the slope. She headed on now across a narrow valley, actually wanting to get away from Impy and his mother. At the other side of the valley she stopped suddenly, stung by an enormous rifle bullet through the right shoulder that had jarred every bone in her body, again filling her with that savage notion to turn and charge.

Again it was Chunky who kept her to side of the valley she stopped suddenly, disappeared, clipped away by a second bullet from the steep slope behind her, and Mamook followed him on into the brush and rocks, going up and up now, the vegetation hiding all four of them and the dogs as well.

Kennewick Benton might have turned back when he came to the brush-choked mouth of a gorge-like opening high on the slope where the back of a great ridge seemed broken. Some of the dogs had gone on into it, hot after the bears, and a man who had shot tigers, lions and elephants was not afraid. He kept on, meeting dogs turning back here and there as if the devil was after them, finding the broken bodies of others now and then. On ahead of him there was a tremendous barking and wailing, and the man only quickened his pace.

He came to a place where the dogs could not go on. Here were higher walls at either hand, and a rocky slope in front of him so steep no dog could climb it. Benton slung the rifle around on his back and

started up, hands digging into cracks in the rocks where the bears had dug their claws into them in their desperate climb.

At two hundred yards up he straightened, swinging the rifle back in front of him, puzzled for a moment, not knowing which way to turn, then he saw claw-scratches in the rocks to his right, and was going up. At seventy feet he rounded a shoulder, and boldly stepped out on a towering ledge above a deep blue lake far below that had once been an ancient volcano crater, the bottom of it nearly a mile below the surface of the water.

Now it was a man moving with the greatest of caution, rifle muzzle pointing in front of him as he eased around a couple of bends. When he turned the third one he stopped, frozen in his tracks, his hat appearing to rise on his head from his heavy hair standing on end. The big-game hunter was face to face with a Rocky Mountain grizzly turning back on the ledge, her Chunky just behind her.

Kennewick Benton did the wrong thing. He might have stopped a tiger at this distance, a lion or a gorilla, and even a grizzly had he been set for it. He thought he was set, but even a big-game hunter could get excited, and he had not thrown a loaded cartridge in the firing chamber after his last shot. The way had been rough, dangerous, the bear a good distance away—and now the firing chamber was empty.

He stepped back quickly, furiously opening and slamming closed the bolt. The rifle crashed, but there was too much excitement here for a dead shot. His bullet merely grazed the already clawed and scratched grizzly skull, and she was suddenly charging, going to make it fast and terrible while it lasted.

Kennewick Benton slipped. Before he could catch himself a round stone no larger than a golf ball was rolling him out in space, and man and the great rifle were going down. Benton felt the wind of a terrific paw-stroke fanning his face, then his cry of terror filling the wild hills and canyons for a mile around.

Mamook stood there for a few moments looking down, into the rippling waters of the deep, deep lake, wondering what foolish notions came to men. Then she was moving on, back down the ledge to a place where she had seen Old Powder Face and her cub suddenly turn and go up. She went up then, spanking Chunky ahead of her, and again headed on to westward. At the end of a mile she was coming down upon Old Powder Face again. Now she would settle another score!

Old Powder Face stood back, trying to stand her ground. Mamook went into her, slapping her half-around and down. Before she could get up, Mamook was banging her on the back. Wailing her woes, Old Powder Face managed to get to her feet with a sudden surge. Mamook hit her again, a blow across the back of the neck and right ear, and Powder Face was gone, over the rim of a sharp little slope, a rolling, bounding thing with her Impy crying as he followed her, saw her get up, and go bear-jumping away.

Still the queen of her diggings, Mamook sat back, all the fight suddenly gone out of her. Chunky came back, watching her cautiously, lifting his lip suspiciously. Mamook reached out, pawning him to her, knowing she was safe from man and dog here, lost for them for all time once she went down the slope ahead. She held the cub closely to her. There was plenty of time.

By Executive Order in September of 1903, the grounds of the McDowell Reservation, named after and located at the site of Fort McDowell (1861-91) on the Verde River in Arizona, became the property of the Mojave-Apache Indians. This represented fruition of a long-standing promise made by General Crook to return to the Mojave-Apache Indians their ancestral home grounds along the river Verde, in appreciation of their help, loyalty and courage in the campaign against Geronimo and his bloodthirsty Apaches. At the end of the campaign Geronimo hid away in the mountains. It was the Mojave-Apache scouts who ferreted out his hiding place and made his capture possible. It was a risky undertaking and not a few of the Indian scouts were wounded before Geronimo was snared.

—J. W. Q.

BULLET DUST

By H. A. DeROSSO



Texas sent a bullet over
Hockett's head.



**When gambler Calvin Rowell deserted
an embittered wife, his young and be-
wildered son had to buck the scorn of
Llano City—alone.**

BECAUSE his grandfather had fallen with Bowie and Crockett at the Alamo, he was named Texas—Texas Rowell. That had all been in the old days when the Calvin Rowells had been a family, in the days before his father, Calvin Rowell, had gone off one stormy night, leaving behind him an embittered wife and a bewildered boy.

That was about all that Texas Rowell could remember, about all he wanted to remember, for he had, unlike so many, no memories that he liked to think about. There were times, too, when Texas Rowell longed to shut the present from him

and live only in dreams of the future.

That was the driving reason for his crossing the railroad tracks to that other part of Llano City where yellow lights out of saloon windows lighted the street as though it were day and where those myriad sounds of revelry and carousal lifted upward. Where he could walk with his head thrown back and a flame in his eyes and a song in his blood that he could not explain.

He could walk down the pine board sidewalks in the first chill of evening, elbowing his way among the roughly clothed miners and booted and spurred cowboys. In his ears there would be harsh laughter and the shrillness of women's voices and the tinny jangling of pianos. He could walk in another world and forget for a while the stiffness and artificiality of that other world he hated.

Above all he could forget Elizabeth Rowell.

She'd surprised him when he had tried to slip out through the kitchen. He could still see her, standing there stiffly straight and her face so pale and rebuking.

"Well, Texas?" she had asked.

He stopped with his hand on the door knob. All his life he had known rebellion against her yet he'd always kept those rebel thoughts inside him for he owed her something. She had raised him and was sending him to college.

"I'm going out," he said.

"Out?" she asked, arching her eyebrows and her fingers drummed the gold head of her cane. She had on a high-necked dress with a lot of lace at the throat. "Doesn't the front door work?"

He didn't say anything to that. He could feel her eyes probing at him and if her face hadn't always been so wooden he would have expected a sneer to frame her lips. He stood about six feet and he still had the skinny leanness of a teen-age boy. His face was long with a sharp chin and a narrow, stubborn mouth.

Elizabeth Rowell tapped the floor a couple of times with her cane. "It's your father's blood in you. That no-good blood of his. I've tried to keep it from coming out in you, Texas. But it's starting to show."

"What's wrong with his blood?" he asked hotly.

"Wrong?" she murmured and he was surprised to see a twisted smile come to her lips though the mirth did not reach her eyes. "Don't you know, Texas? Your stealing away at night, your mingling with all that trash down on Panhandle Street. That's what's wrong."

"I'm no child," he told her flatly. "I'm twenty. I've listened to you as long as I intend. I've always done my best to obey you, to be what you want me to be, but I'm not that kind of a man. If it's my father's blood coming out in me, then I'm proud of it!"

"You've been seeing him," she said.

"Yes."

That was all. He knew that she knew he'd been stealing away at night for almost a month now, ever since Calvin Rowell had drifted into Llano City. Texas expected her to say something, some words of inquiry about Calvin Rowell, but if she'd been of a mind to ask such things she'd have done so long ago.

"I won't stop you then," she said quietly. "I trust you know better than to follow his ways. Perhaps it's a good thing. This way you might come to see him for what he really is and so you'll never have any regrets or any reproach for what I've done. . . ."

HE WALKED along under the stars and he lifted a hand and removed the tie from his shirt and unbuttoned the collar. His face lost its tightness and the wrinkles smoothed away from the edges of his eyes and his mouth lengthened with a slight smile.

The clapping of his heels on the walk was lost among all the other noises. He brushed past two drunken, reeling cowboys and turned into the Palace.

Texas Rowell scarcely noticed the long mahogany bar and its brass rail, shiny from countless boot scrapings. Nor the high mirror that ran the length of the wall behind the bar nor the glitter of the lamp-light on the bottles and glasses stacked on the backbar.

He passed through the arch that led to the dance hall and there he met Calvin Rowell. There was no music or dancing for it was almost time for the first show of the evening. The dance floor was crowded with people, many of them stand-

ing but others had brought in chairs from the barroom.

It was a motley crowd—miners with the stain of their calling showing in the creases of their hands, bow-legged and spurred cowboys in their wide-brimmed, flat-crowned hats, and in the boxes along the wall the more substantial citizens.

Calvin Rowell was leaning against the wall. He was a thick man and none too tall. He had a noble profile with his straight nose and the soft curve of his mustache and the graying goatee. He had on a long black coat and his thumbs were hooked in the pockets of his gaudy, flowered vest.

There was warmth in Texas Rowell's face when he stepped up and said, "Hello, Calvin."

Calvin Rowell turned his head and his eyes softened when he saw his son. "Oh, hello, boy. You're just in time. Cherokee will be on in a few minutes."

Texas Rowell leaned against the wall beside his father, feeling a vast pride for the man. Calvin Rowell was so capable, so strong. For all his fine manners and soft speech there was nevertheless a hardness to him that softened other men's voices respectfully when they addressed Calvin Rowell. Perhaps it was his uncompromising gray-green eyes or the way he had of thinning his lips when displeasure was in him.

The show began. Texas Rowell had scant attention for that. A couple of black-face comedians and two jugglers. They all got laughs and cheers and jeers and noisy demonstrations. So did the half dozen chorus girls. But a respectful hush settled over the spectators when Cherokee appeared.

She was small with a piquantly beautiful face and a poignant sadness in her voice. She was about the prettiest thing Texas Rowell had ever seen. She sang a couple of ballads and you could tell the crowd liked her but there was a restraint and a respect in the applause.

After she was through, she stepped down from the stage and the spectators made a lane for her to pass on her way to Calvin Rowell. It wasn't her beauty or her sweetness that made these uninhibited men act thus, Texas knew. It was the presence of Calvin Rowell for Cherokee was his daughter by his second wife.

Cherokee had on a red, high-necked dress and her hand was cool in Texas' grasp. They exchanged amenities and then she said to Calvin:

"Have you asked Texas yet?"

"I was going to ask him now," said Calvin Rowell. He turned to his son. "Cherokee wants to go to the ball Saturday night. She's never been to one like that. Would you take her, Texas?"

"Sure," he grinned. "I'll be glad to. I'll be the envy of them all."

* * *

There was a thinness to Calvin Rowell's lips as he said, "If anything happens, Texas, you tell me. If they don't treat Cherokee right, you tell me, hey?"

They were outside Cherokee's hotel room and Texas was all dressed up in his best, feeling the irritating rasp of the starched, stiff collar against his tender neck.

"I can't see why they shouldn't treat her right, Calvin," he said slowly. "They might not approve of you, but she can't be

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held to blame for that. I don't think there will be anything wrong."

"I hope not but if there is, you tell me."

Cherokee came out of her room then and both men smiled on her. She was dressed all in white with a single strand of pearls around her neck.

"All right?" she asked Texas, smiling happily.

"You bet," he grinned.

"Have a good time," Calvin Rowell said and then he was gone. Cherokee and Texas went down the stairs and through the lobby and out into the night. Dimly they could hear the noise from Panhandle Street as they turned into that part of Llano City where the night knew a quiet stillness broken only by the clapping of footsteps on the walks and the rustling of the leaves in the breeze.

Texas looked down at Cherokee and saw that she was trembling a little. "Cold?" he asked. "You're shaking."

"No, no," she laughed shakily. "Excitement, I guess. You know, Texas, I've never been to one of these balls. Where everything is nice and orderly and there is no loud, drunken talk and the music is soft and they ask you to dance in a polite way and they don't paw you. Do you think they'll like me, Texas?"

"Sure," he grinned. "Why shouldn't they?"

She stared fixedly at the darkness ahead of her. "Calvin," she said.

"Oh, that. They won't mind. You're going with me. You're my sister. They won't mind."

"He's a fine man, Texas."

"None better."

"Why did it turn out like this? About your mother, I mean."

"They just didn't fit together. Like cattle and sheep on the same range, I guess. Mother had money and she was out West on a vacation. Calvin swept her off her feet. Mother came from a proud family. They couldn't forgive her for marrying a gambler. She was from another world. While everything was new she was happy, but when the novelty wore off she couldn't stand living with a gambler. They just didn't fit together, that's all, Cherokee, and Calvin walked off. Mother got a divorce and stayed on out here, hating the land and its people, too proud to go back

East and admit she was wrong and others right. . . ."

THE Saturday night ball was being held in the Silas Fetterman home this week. Fetterman was the biggest real estate man in Llano City and he had the largest and most luxurious dwelling in town. There were several carriages drawn up on the side lawn and all the windows of the house were ablaze with lamplight.

There was pride in Texas Rowell as he escorted the girl up the steps and into the place, but afterwards it all seemed like a bad dream. He knew that he could never shake that scene from him. The way everyone had cut him cold, the stares at Cherokee and the frigidness of the whole situation that left him standing there, feeling the whole world crumbling about him and suddenly hating everyone in this room and everything they stood for.

He'd seen the flush of shame mount Cherokee's cheeks and in the midst of all that silence he'd cried out harshly, "Dirty, foul scum!"

He'd never known such a sudden and complete anger that enveloped every inch of him and Elizabeth Rowell's words came pounding back into his memory—*It's your father's blood coming out in you. . . .*

He took Cherokee's arm tenderly and led her outside and it wasn't until they were out on the walk that she began to cry.

He took her to her room and then Texas went to the Palace. When Calvin Rowell saw his son's face the gambler left his table. "So they did it," he said, his lips very thin.

"They cut her cold, Calvin," Texas said.

"I expected it," Calvin said stiffly. "I knew they'd do it to her. But I couldn't say no to her. She had her heart set on going. Damn their ugly, dirty minds. They come down here, all of them, many a night. . . . Then they'll cut the heart out of a poor, innocent girl!"

"What're you going to do, Calvin?"

Calvin Rowell laughed coldly. He reached under his arm and took out his gun. He went over to the bar and handed the weapon to a bartender. "Keep this for me, Mike."

Then Calvin Rowell clapped his son on

the back. "I won't do anything rash, Texas. I just want to tell those smug sons what I think of them."

Texas accompanied his father to the Fetterman home. When they turned into the gate Texas dropped a few steps behind. There were several men outside the door, their cigars glowing redly in the darkness.

They spied Calvin Rowell and they moved over in front of the door, blocking his entrance.

"I want in," Calvin said flatly. "I have something to say, something I want everyone to hear."

One of the men detached himself from the group and caught Calvin Rowell's arm. This was a tall man and even in the night Texas could see that the man had long, blond hair reaching down to his shoulders in the frontier style. He was loose-jointed and gaunt, but there was an air of liteness, treacherous liteness about him.



This was Brand Hockett, marshal of Llano City.

"They expected you," Hockett was saying. "So they sent for me. Come along, Rowell. You're not wanted here. You nor your kind."

"Don't stand in my way, Hockett!"

"Come on, come on," said Hockett heatedly, pulling at Calvin's arm. Suddenly Calvin Rowell twisted and drove a blow into the marshal's face. Hockett stumbled backward and even as he was falling he whipped out a gun.

The orange flames licked twice at the darkness and Calvin Rowell fell to his knees. He knelt there, holding up his head with an effort and his voice was strangely loud:

"Damn you, Hockett. Damn you for the sneaking murderer that you are."

Once more Hockett fired and Calvin Rowell collapsed the rest of the way.

Texas Rowell's held-up breath exploded in a ringing cry and he threw himself at Brand Hockett. The marshal was just getting to his feet and he turned abruptly, his teeth showing white as Texas drove in. Hockett's gun leveled.

But the watchers closed in and grabbed Texas and went sprawling with him to the grass of the lawn. Others had hold of Hockett and he was fighting their restraining hands and cursing.

One of the men said angrily, "You've done enough this night, Hockett. Rowell didn't have a gun."

"How was I to know. He was always heeled."

Texas was on his feet. "This isn't the first time for Hockett," he cried. "You'll find all his killings like this. In Abilene and Hays City and Ellsworth. He's never given a man an even break. That's your marshal!"

"Hold your tongue, kid!" Hockett shouted.

"Yeah, I'll hold it," Texas said brokenly. "Talking don't do any good. Next time we meet, Hockett, I'll hold my tongue and a gun!"

He saw them gathering around Calvin Rowell's body, all of the men out of the house and in the background some of the women. There was a choking pain in Texas' breast and he cried out, unashamed of his tears:

"Go away. All of you. You never wanted anything to do with him while he was alive, why do you stand here staring now that he's dead? Go back inside and start your music and dance the whole damn night. I'll take care of him. I'll take him away. Only go and leave me alone with my father."

AFTER Calvin Rowell had been lowered into his grave, Texas Rowell took Cherokee's arm and led her away. There weren't many who had followed

Calvin Rowell on his last journey. Texas and Cherokee and a half dozen gamblers and the employees of the Palace.

Texas took Cherokee to her hotel and then he went uptown, to Elizabeth Rowell's house. She was seated in the living room, an open book in her lap. Texas Rowell stood there stiffly, his hands clenched.

She was as he had always remembered her. Her face, deathly pale and as immovable of expression as the features of a wooden image. Deliberately he selected the cruelest thing he could think of to say: "You can't forgive even death."

She was patient in answering and if his remark had hurt she did not show it. "No, Texas, I can't."

"You could have showed yourself," he cried angrily. "You could have gone to his funeral."

"He had his mourners. He had his son. What more could he ask?"

Texas took a step forward, his hand raised, the anger and anguish raging behind his eyes. For once he saw something like fear and horror in her eyes and he remembered himself and dropped his hand.

"He had his daughter, too. My sister. She's the only precious thing I have left. All my life I've been alone, brought up to scorn others as being below my station, never knowing or even suspecting that there was love and companionship in the world.

"For years he's been seeing me secretly. While I was away at school, here in Llano City. Him and Cherokee. It was like another world when they were around. They talked and laughed and made you feel like you were somebody. They were real people, not—not wooden images!"

She dropped her gaze from him and her face softened and there was an immeasurable sadness in her tone. "Even in death, I envy him."

He could only stare at her uncomprehendingly and so she raised her eyes once more and her lips moved stiffly. "The last thing in the world I wanted to yield to him he still has even in death."

He started to turn away and she asked, "Where are you going, Texas?"

He faced her and showed her a mirthless grin. "I'm going to kill a man," he said.

"No, Texas," she said, and for a moment he thought she'd get up from her chair and try to reach out a hand to hold him back, but she remained seated. "No. He wasn't worth it, Texas."

"Maybe," he said. "But even if it was only a dog I'd never seen in my life that I saw shot down for no reason at all, I'd take it up with the killer. And Calvin, he—he was my father."

"You'll be hurt, Texas."

He stared at her a long while and then he said, "Is there some feeling in you after all?" And as the color mounted to her face, he walked away. . . .

It was along toward evening and the first shadows were enveloping Llano City. Texas Rowell crossed the railroad tracks to Panhandle street and made for the Palace. He found Mike behind the bar.

"I want Calvin's gun," said Texas.

Mike stared at him a while and then Texas put out his hand, palm up, Mike comprehended the glint in the boy's eyes and bent and slid the sixshooter across the bar.

"It's your funeral, kid," Mike said.

Texas laughed shortly and then he picked up the gun and inspected the cylinder. All six chambers were loaded and he laughed again without humor and shoved the long barrel down his waistband. He walked out without another word.

The darkness was complete and he glanced up and saw the stars in the sky. The wind was a cold slap against his face and he raised a hand and buttoned his collar. He left Panhandle Street and all its teeming, roaring life behind him and struck out for that other part of Llano City.

He paused on the corner of Mesa and Denver streets and there, with his back against the wall of the Mercantile, he waited. Brand Hockett would be along soon, crossing over to Panhandle Street on his nightly rounds.

In Texas' ears there were the jumbled sounds from Panhandle, dim with distance, but vibrant with life. From up Mesa Street, came the soft strains of a melody played on a piano.

HE STOOD there waiting, the gun pressing against his middle, one ear cocked to the many sounds of Panhandle

Street, the other tuned to the piano. Someone began singing, a soft, feminine voice singing.

And then he was conscious only of the figure coming down the walk. Texas dropped his fingers to gun handle and it was very cold in his grip. Slowly he pulled out the weapon and thumbed back the hammer. Hockett came swinging along down the other side of the street.

Somewhere off in the night a coyote howled and the song was still in Texas' ears.

He tipped his gun barrel up and sent a bullet over Brand Hockett's head. The man was a swirling movement in the shadows as he ducked into the doorway of Masterson's shoe store. Texas waited, shrinking as far back as he could into the shadows.

"Let's have it over with, Hockett!" he shouted.

Gunfire answered him and bullets slapped into the board wall above him. He had the gun flashes to guide his aim and he took his time and sent five bullets into Masterson's doorway.

The echoes were still ringing when the shadows trembled and erupted a coughing, weaving figure that stumbled forward and collapsed in the dust.

The song continued unbroken in Texas' ears. Gunfire from Panhandle Street was common enough at night and the good citizens of Llano City paid no heed to the ruckus.

He returned home and found Elizabeth Rowell in the parlor. If there was turmoil within her, she gave no sign. So he told her bluntly:

"I killed Hockett and I'm leaving. I'll be a hunted man now for Hockett wore a

badge. They won't judge whether I was justified in killing him. They'll consider only that Hockett wore a badge and I killed him. Me, the son of no-good Calvin Rowell."

He did not go on to tell her that from now on he was a marked man. Marked as fair game for all those men who lived by the gun. Fair game for any man who, if successful, could brag, "I killed Texas Rowell who killed Brand Hockett who killed Kid Bisbee who killed—" He did not tell her for he felt that she was not interested.

"You're leaving?" she asked.

"Yes, but I thought I'd come and tell you. You know how I feel about you, yet I owe you something. Not much perhaps, but still I owe you something. I'm not running out on you. But I'm going away. And when I'm settled I'll send for Cherokee and I'll take care of her until she finds herself a man. If you want to come—"

She shook her head. "No, Texas. I'll stay here in this house."

"Do you understand?"

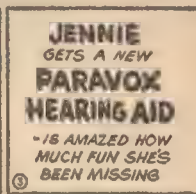
"Yes, I understand. You see, Texas, all my life I wanted you only for myself. I never wanted half-a-son. I didn't want to share you with him. But now I know I can't even have half-a-son."

"I'll go then," he said, but at the door he paused. "I'm sorry it had to turn out like this."

"It's all right, Texas. Thanks for seeing me before you left—"

And when he took his leave of Cherokee and she saw the look on his face, she said, "You look so happy, Texas."

"I'm free," he told her. "For the first time in my life I'm free."



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MY FRIEND, THE KILLER

By RAY
GAULDEN



★
Old Eli Hibbard stood loyally by him—but the town was full of pent-up resentment against killer Vic Desmond.

VIC DESMOND and Eli Hibbard walked down the steps of the old sandstone courthouse and the crowd fell back, letting them through. Desmond could see the resentment in the eyes of some of the people, who a few minutes ago had jammed the courtroom and heard the judge say, "Not guilty."

Desmond waved the gun threateningly.

Desmond kept his dark-skinned, handsome face straight, but he couldn't resist putting a little swagger into his walk, and there was a hint of mockery in his restless, black eyes. He heard one of the townsmen say sullenly, "He was just about as guilty as hell."

Eli Hibbard laid his thin, bony hand on Desmond's arm. "Don't pay any attention to them, Vic. They're a bunch of pig-headed fools."

Desmond looked down at the little white-headed oldster and gave him a tired smile. "It's all right, Eli. Let's get away from here."

They walked across the courthouse square to where Eli had parked the old rattletrap buckboard. They climbed in and Eli spoke to the team, heading them down main street, past the sun-blistered buildings lining this strip of white dust. Desmond saw the red and white striped pole in front of the barber shop and then the slatted half doors of the saloon. It was there he had killed the gambler, but it did not bother Desmond to look at the place; it did not bother him a bit.

Eli put one foot on the dashboard and bit off a chew. "I don't know what's the matter with folks," he growled. "Can't see why they have to be so danged suspicious all the time."

Reaching for his tobacco sack, Desmond shook some of the flakes into a wheatstraw paper. He said, "Well, anyway, they didn't pin it on me. That lawyer sure tied their prosecuting attorney up in knots."

Eli nodded soberly. "He knew you weren't guilty, Vic."

About to lick the flap on the cigarette, Desmond paused, glancing at the old man out of the corner of his eye. "Yeah," he said quickly. "That's right."

Eli was looking off toward the mountains. "We'll have to get to work now," he said. "We'll have to beat the brush and see if we can't round up some cattle to sell."

Desmond frowned, not liking the idea of having to go to work. He said, "I was hoping we could take a little vacation, maybe go down to Denver and see the sights."

Eli shook his head ruefully. "I wish we could, Vic, but to tell you the truth, I'm

broke. Raked up every dime I had to hire that New York lawyer for you."

The buildings dropped behind them and they came to Ma Kenyon's boarding house on the edge of town. Glancing at the place, Eli said, "Can't figure what's happened to Ella and the sheriff. Ella's a nice girl and Stan is steady and hard-workin'. I sort of figured they'd be married by now, but I hear they ain't gettin' along so good."

Desmond turned his head so that Eli couldn't see much of his face. He was afraid his eyes might give him away. Then he relaxed, telling himself there was nothing to worry about. The old man was too simple minded to catch on to anything. He didn't have the slightest notion that Desmond was the reason Ella wasn't seeing the sheriff so much.

They reached the ranch about noon and Eli cooked dinner while Desmond unhitched the team and put the buckboard up. After they had eaten, Desmond sat on the front porch while Eli went down to the barn to look after his favorite horse. The old restlessness was pulling at Desmond, making him irritable. He rolled a smoke, his eyes moody, and then he turned his head as hoofbeats sounded on the trail.

Stan Martin rode into the yard, his badge winking in the sunlight. He sat loosely in the saddle, a lanky, quiet-eyed man who, Desmond figured, didn't cut much of a figure. Desmond gave him a cold stare. "Well, Martin. You checking up on me already?"

Martin dismounted and came over to the porch and sat down on the edge of it. "No, Desmond," he said. "I had some business over east of here. Just stopped by on my way back to town."

Desmond felt the tug of resentment. He looked at the sheriff, his lips thin with contempt. He said, "I told you that you wouldn't be able to make that murder charge stick."

Martin took out a pipe, blackened from long use, and tamped tobacco into it. He didn't look at Desmond. "You were guilty," he said. "You know it and I know it. Perkins was an honest gambler. I went to school with him and I know what I'm talking about. He gave away most of his money to the poor families in

town. He helped to build the church."

Desmond flipped his cigarette into the yard. It was still burning and he sat there with his eyes on the curling smoke. He said, "Perkins was a crook. He dealt from the bottom of the deck, but he won't do it any more."

Martin got the pipe going and shook the match out. He said, "I know better than that, Desmond. You killed him because you were losing to him in that card game and you couldn't take it. You're bad, Desmond, and everybody except Eli knows it."

"Ella doesn't know it," Desmond said pointedly.

Martin flinched, his teeth clamping down hard on the pipe stem. Finally he said, "Ella's not much more than a kid, Desmond, and she hasn't been the same since she met you at that dance. She's just a small town girl who's never been around and you gave her a smooth line, filled her head with a lot of fancy talk."

Desmond's eyes were closed down, his lips thin and twisted. "You couldn't hold her, Martin. That's all that's wrong with you."

Martin shook his head, staring at Desmond steadily. "You're wrong. If I thought you were the man for her, I wouldn't say a word."

Desmond felt the heat of anger in his face. "That badge makes it possible for you to talk pretty big, Martin."

"I'm not talking big, Desmond. I'm just telling it straight. You drifted in here a year ago and Eli took a liking to you. The old fellow hasn't been the same since his wife and only son died. He thought a lot of that boy of his and you look a little like him, Desmond. Maybe that's why Eli took to you. Anyway, he can't seem to see that you're bad. You've been in trouble a half a dozen times and he has stuck up for you. It cost him a lot of money to hire that smart shyster."

Desmond put a sneer on his lips. "You're breaking my heart, Martin."

The sheriff continued as though he hadn't heard. "Eli has saved your bacon so far, Desmond, but one of these days he won't be around to help you. He's got a bad heart and the doc says he's apt to go anytime."

Desmond kept sneering. "What am I

supposed to do, Sheriff, start crying?"

THE sheriff didn't seem to be getting any satisfaction from the pipe. He turned the bowl over and tapped it against the heel of his hand. Putting it back in his pocket, he looked once more at Desmond. His lips moved as though he were going to say something else, but just then old Eli came out of the barn. Seeing Martin, he called, "Stan, what are you doing out here?"

Martin got up and started toward the barn. He said over his shoulder, "So long, Desmond. But I don't mean good-bye."

Desmond sat there, cursing the man under his breath, hating him. He heard Eli and Martin talking about nothing in particular. Eli said, "Been down lookin' after Charlie."

Martin looked a little worried. "I wish you'd get rid of that black devil, Eli. You'll never be able to take the meanness out of him."

Eli spat tobacco juice into the dust. "Give me another month, Stan, and I'll have that horse eatin' out of my hand." Eli broke off, glancing toward the house. He turned to the sheriff again, his eyes troubled. "Stan you didn't come out here to bother Vic again, did you?"

The sheriff looked a little uncomfortable. "No, Eli. I was just passing by."

"Well, I wish you'd leave him alone. He's a good boy."

Martin shifted uneasily, and when he glanced toward the house, Desmond gave him a thin, sardonic smile. Looking back at Eli, Martin took his watch out and flipped it open. "Guess I better get back to town," he said.

Eli came to the porch and stood beside Desmond, watching the sheriff ride away. The oldster sighed, and patting Desmond affectionately on the shoulder, he turned and went into the house. Presently there was the familiar rattle of the coffee pot and Desmond made a wry face, thinking, *Don't he ever get tired of drinking that stuff.*

Rolling a smoke, he let his eyes roam about the yard. There were no flowers, nothing but weeds. His lips twisted with distaste as he looked at the sagging roof of the barn. Once it had been a prosperous little outfit, but now it was in a sad

state of neglect, and Desmond was getting sick of it. Eli was beginning to get on his nerves. Of course the old man was good to him, and for a while it hadn't been so bad. He had lain around and taken it easy, spending a lot of time in town, drinking and playing cards. But Eli was broke now and it looked like the vacation was over.

Restlessness driving him, Desmond went down to the barn, killing time by inspecting his gear. He heard Charlie moving around back in one of the stalls and Desmond cursed the horse. He didn't know why Eli kept that big black outlaw around. The mutter of hoofs took Desmond to the doorway and he watched Pedro Gomez ride into the yard. Desmond had seen him in town several times and knew that he ran a goat ranch back in the hills.

Seeing Desmond, Pedro rode up to the barn. He stayed in the saddle, looking down at Desmond, his brown face expressionless. "The Senorita Ella sent me," he said.

Desmond stared at the man curiously. "Yes?"

Pedro folded his hands over the horn of the old scrap-heap saddle, his eyes remaining on Desmond's face. "She wants you to meet her as soon as you can."

Desmond wet his dry lips with the tip of his tongue. "Where?" he asked.

"The usual place, she said."

Desmond nodded. "Thanks," he said, and when Pedro had ridden on, he got his horse and saddled quickly. Swinging aboard, he was ready to ride out of the yard when Eli came out of the house and stood on the porch, looking at him.

"Where you goin', Vic?"

"Just going to take a little ride," Desmond answered.

The old man nodded. "All right, Vic. I'll putter around and maybe clean out the barn. But we better get to bed early so we can get at them cows in the mornin'."

Desmond felt impatience rubbing him. "Yeah," he said. "I won't be too late."

Desmond headed in the direction of town, wondering why Ella had sent for him. He couldn't guess, but he didn't let it worry him. He liked the idea of seeing her and he kept his horse at a steady pace and it wasn't long until he reached the timbered rise off to the left of the trail. She had met him here before, but never in the daytime.

He rode through a grove of quaking aspens, his heart beginning to pound at sight of her. She was standing on a carpet of pine needles, her back against the slender trunk of one of the tall trees beyond the aspen thicket. Her horse stood not far away, but Desmond had eyes only for the girl. He swung down and went toward her.

"Hello, Ella. What's up?" He started to take her in his arms, but she stepped back quickly and looked at him pleadingly. "Don't, Vic. Please."

A frown began to build on his forehead. "What's the matter with you?"

There wasn't much color in her cheeks and she seemed to have trouble looking at him. "I'm not going to see you any more, Vic. This is the last time."

He stared at her intently, the left side of his mouth pulling down. "I suppose you've been talking to Martin?"

She shook her head. "No, Vic, I've just been doing a lot of thinking."

"About us?"

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"YES, about us. I knew from the very first that you weren't good for me, but you kind of swept me off my feet. You've been around, Vic. You know how to say the things a girl likes to hear; you can paint a lot of pretty pictures of the big cities. But you'd never stay tied to one woman. You'd break my heart as soon as you got tired of me."

"Hush that crazy talk," Desmond said sharply.

She shook her head stubbornly. "It's no use, Vic. There's no future for us. There's nothing but meeting here like—like this."

"Ella," he said and reached for her, knowing that if he could get her in his arms, he could change her mind. But she slipped past him and ran to her horse. He heard her crying as she flung herself into the saddle, but she didn't stop and she didn't look back.

Desmond stood scowling as he watched her ride swiftly down the slope. He couldn't understand what had gotten into her. His eyes thoughtful, he hunkered down on his bootheels, putting his back against a pine tree and rolling a smoke. He tried to figure out what he was going to do now. He liked Ella more than he had ever liked any other woman, but he told himself that he could never get anywhere with her around here. His only chance, Desmond figured was to leave this two-bit town and go away, to Mexico, maybe. If he had a stake, he could do that. He could send for her, give her a lot of smooth talk about how she could live like a queen, and she'd come. He knew she would.

But he was broke. He didn't have a dime and the knowledge of this rankled him. His face sour, he stared down the slope at the trail leading to town. A dust cloud appeared and he watched it idly. A stagecoach came into view, rocking, swaying along the narrow trail toward him, and watching it, Desmond remembered that this was Friday. Payday at the mines. He had seen them, one day in town, loading the big strongbox, and the thought had run through his mind then that a man could do all right with that box full of money.

Desmond stood up, his nerves beginning to tingle. He told himself this would be a

cinch. He couldn't miss. He drew his gun, quickly checking the loads, and after tying his bandanna across his face, he hurried down to the trail. There was a big brown boulder and he crouched at the side of it, his heart kicking hard against his ribs as he waited.

He heard the Concord rattling along the rough trail. He waited until it was close, then leaped out into the trail, firing his gun once into the air. That stopped them and Desmond looked them over. The one handling the ribbons was old and gaunt and he didn't look as though he was going to get very worked up about this. But Desmond didn't get the same impression when he looked at the other fellow. He was young, not much more than a kid, and he had a pair of reckless eyes. You never could tell about a gent like that, so Desmond watched him carefully, even after he'd dropped his shotgun in the dust.

The old man sat on the high seat looking down at Desmond. He asked, "What are you after, mister?"

Desmond laughed, a dry, humorless sound. "You know what I'm after. Throw it down."

The young shotgun guard licked his lips. "We're not carrying any money."

Desmond's eyes above the mask were flat and hot. "Don't give me that," he said harshly. "Throw it down."

The old man kept looking at Desmond, but he spoke to the guard. "We better let him have it. He means business."

The guard didn't look very happy about it, but he lifted the strongbox and dropped it over the side. When it hit the ground, Desmond glanced down at it, taking his eyes off them for a moment, and that was when the guard decided to make his play. His hand whipped down, jerking a gun out of his boot.

Fear knifing through him, Desmond brought his own weapon up and squeezed the trigger. The guard stood up and put both hands over the front of his shirt, as if he was trying to hide the red spot that had suddenly appeared there. He swayed a moment and then pitched out of the box, hit the ground hard and didn't move again.

The old man's eyes were hot with accusation. "You've killed him, damn you. He was a good boy and you killed him."

Desmond's eyes were wild and some of

the color had washed out of his face. He waved the gun threateningly. "Shut up," he said hoarsely. "And get going."

The old man spoke to the team and the big Concord jerked into motion. Desmond stared after it a moment, then turned his attention to the strongbox. His hands were shaking a little and he had to use three bullets to break the padlock. He tried to keep his eyes away from the dead guard while he was getting the money. He was bent over the box, stuffing the greenbacks inside his shirt when he heard the rapid pound of hoofs. His head snapped up and he saw a lone rider.

Fear came back to Desmond then. It was like a scaly thing crawling along his. He was bent over the box, stuffing the rest of the money inside his shirt. That lone rider was getting closer and Desmond ran back up the slope to where he had left his horse. He flung himself into the saddle and rode away from there, spurring hard. He did not take the main trail, but cut across country. He kept glancing over his shoulder, but saw no sign of any pursuit. Still, he didn't let his horse slacken its pace.

The ranchhouse came in sight and relief washed through him. In a few minutes now he would be safe. He approached the house from the back, cutting down through a dry wash. And then suddenly the horse stumbled and went down. Desmond flew out of the saddle, hit the ground and rolled over and over. He was shaken up a little, but he wasn't hurt. He got to his feet and looked at his horse. He could tell that the left front leg was broken.

Desmond drew his gun and quickly ended the horse's suffering. Then he hid the money in some brush and climbed out of the wash, running toward the back door of the house. He ducked inside and went through the kitchen calling Eli's name, but the old man wasn't in the house. Probably down at the barn, Desmond figured as he stepped to the front window and looked out. He heard the swift, hard beat of hoofs and saw a rider racing toward the ranch.

Desmond could feel the sweat running down his back and there was a cold spot in his stomach. He ejected the spent shells from his gun and reloaded it. He looked

back out the window, his mouth tightening as he watched Stan Martin come pounding into the yard. The sheriff dismounted and stood for a moment looking about him. He walked past the corral and reaching the barn, he stopped and threw a searching glance at the house. Then he stepped inside the barn and was out of sight for a moment.

Desmond walked out onto the porch, trying to keep calm, telling himself he didn't have a thing to worry about. Eli would stick up for him. If necessary, the old man would get up in court and swear that he had never left the ranch. Desmond put his shoulders back and waited.

Martin came out of the barn and began a slow walk toward the house, his hand not far from the butt of his gun. He stopped at the bottom of the steps, his face grim as he looked up at Desmond. He said, "I followed Ella when she went to meet you, Desmond. I wasn't far away when you held up the stage. I heard the shots."

Desmond's insides were quivering, but he tried to put a grin on his lips. "You're crazy, Martin. I haven't been off the place. You can ask Eli."

The sheriff shook his head slowly, his eyes never leaving Desmond's face. "Eli can't help you any more. He's dead—stomped to death by that damned black horse."

Desmond couldn't hear a sound anywhere. He searched Martin's face and knew that the sheriff wasn't bluffing. There was only one thing to do now and Desmond tried it. His hand jerked down, his fingers wrapping about the bone handle of his gun. But Martin wasn't just standing there; he was drawing his own weapon and a great sickness spread through Desmond as he realized he was not fast enough on the draw.

Desmond fired and saw his bullet kick up the dust at Martin's feet, and then something hot and heavy smashed into him, driving him back against the front of the house. He dropped his gun and stared fixedly at the red splotch on the front of his shirt. It was growing larger by the second, and as the darkness closed in on him, he turned his head toward the barn, listening to the sharp whinny of the big black horse.



HOT-LEAD

By WILLIAM R. COX



Fat Harry's men came in
from all sides.

CHAPTER

1

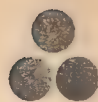
Shotgun Messenger

The posse was very small. Too small, thought Sheriff Walt Kenney, riding apart on his easy-paced roan; too small and too whiskey-brave. Furthermore, it would never hold together all the

way into Rawhide. This crowd had no stomach for Rawhide.

Abner Dey, fortyish, bearded, angry-eyed, reined over. The Wells Fargo Agent at Oreville had rousted out this bunch to track down Fat Harry Lacey and his gang because he was worried, because the prestige of his company was threatened. All

REQUIEM



Counting on help from undercover man Tom Turner, Fat Harry Lacey swore the death of Wells Fargo—and Sheriff Walt Kenny, in a town full of Lacey spies, had to fight a blind battle.



*Scorching
Wells Fargo
Novelette*

the elements of the situation were clear in Walt Kenney's mind, a mind practised in the seething ways of the West.

Dey said, "You see how it is? They hold up the stages and if the messenger lifts his gun they shoot him. The driver has to throw down the boxes or be killed. Even Whip Mackey can't fight a gang of ten or a dozen Fat Harry boys. We know they are holed up at Rawhide. They own Rawhide. The damn town wouldn't exist, wasn't for Fat Harry. But we can't get a crowd of men to go over and burn 'em out."

"Why should they?" The lean sheriff grinned at the agent. "It's Wells Fargo's business, ain't it? To get the bullion out and the cash in."

"We had 'em cast the bullion in three hundred pound bars. Y' know what Fat Harry did?"

"He brought wagons along," nodded Walt. "Been done before."

"Still, it makes the job harder," said Dey stubbornly. The posse rode on, spreading in the late afternoon, getting closer now to Rawhide, where the outlaws foregathered. The pace slackened. Dey said, "No use. Might as well go back."

Newt Longacre, slightly drunk, called over, "Hain't no trace of 'em. We cain't fight the town, Abner."

Bottles gurgled and sighs of relief went up from the small group of men. Dey growled, "Turner would go in, I think. That young gambler seems game enough."

"You, me and the boy?" Sheriff Walt Kenney laughed. "Not a chance. They'd get us for sure."

They wheeled and started back over the dirt trail. Nobody wanted to talk. The road lay straight to the woodsy section east of High Rocky. Farther east on the main road lay rail's end, Blue Valley, a full day's stage trip. On this road the depredations had been committed, Walt Kenney knew, now from behind high rock, now from the convenient woods.

Sheriff Kenney was a young man himself, well under thirty, but he could well remember great changes in the Western scene. Events raced over the short years as an empire grew. The buffalo was gone, the Indian almost quiescent, yet he could remember stinking hides and huge graveyards of bone—and his parents had been

massacred by the cruel, rampaging Sioux.

He rode still to the side, apart from this culling of Oreville's bars. On the right wing rode Tom Turner. He could hear the youth's cheerful voice. Turner was garrulous, large and brave, it seemed. He was a blond, curly-haired fellow, a stand-out among this crew. Yet Turner gambled with anyone, everyone. He described himself, laughingly, as a gamblin' fool from tenderfoot country. People liked him and no one in Oreville tried to tromple on him despite his youth and background.

The stage was due about now and Abner Dey's daughter was on it.

There was no strong-box riding this trip and Johnny One-Card would not have any trouble, Walt Kenney thought. He imagined that Dey wanted to escort the girl into town, to ease her arrival among the crudities of Oreville. Norma Dey had been East at school.

The first shots sounded like an alarm. Walt Kenney's roan pricked up one ear and began to run without urging. The posse wavered. Dey turned chalk white and shouted, "They're hittin' it! Come on, damn you, come on!"

Turner was already riding—the boy could sit a horse all right—and Walt Kenney headed into the trees to the left. Dey outdistanced the others, but Newt Longacre's black ran away with him and straight at the path winding among the trees.

The others scattered, drawing rifles from their boots, taking their time about it, not eager for the conflict. Dey was frantic, and Walt Kenney rode toward him a bit, trying to cover the anxious father. There were more shots beyond the trees.

There was a good mile of run. Walt Kenney held the roan down. Dey and Longacre and Turner drew away. Kenney got out his rifle and checked a shell into the chamber. He saw the first man come through the woods.

The man wore no mask. He sat boldly, shouting back over his shoulder, raising a gun. Walt Kenney fired off-hand, let the roan really loose. The outlaw pitched forward and Turner let loose a wild yip and began shooting his rifle at the trees.

Walt Kenney sighed with disgust, riding. Longacre's wild horse snapped the

bit in his teeth and plunged ahead. He threw out his arms. The black stumbled. Longacre did a circle over the beast's head landing on his back, long arms still outstretched and lay like a cross upon the earth.

At the last possible moment Abner Dey reined on the angle toward Walt Kenney. The gang came out of the trees, riding like Comanches. They were a hard-bitten, trained crew of bandits. They spread a little and Walt Kenney caught sight of the mail sacks tied to saddles. Fat Harry, big as a mountain, rode a gray which would stand seventeen hands high and could jump over the moon.

WALT KENNEY drew a bead, but two men intervened. They were riding cover and shooting straight and low. He dropped one of them, but the hail of lead was too heavy and the roan bolted into the trees. He fought the horse, turning.

The posse had disintegrated with the first volley. Abner Dey was shooting, and missing. Turner was out of sight in the forest. The rest were simply gone, scared to cover.

Walt Kenney shrugged, re-loading his gun. The outlaws were out of range. There were at least ten of them left. Abner Dey was yelling, "I've got to find her—" He was gone through the trees, and his voice floated back, "Turner! Come with me! I've got to get to her."

Walt Kenney rode back into the open. The outlaws were a dust cloud bound for Rawhide and sanctity among their own kind. The posse was appearing, chagrined, shame-faced. They were gathering around Newt Longacre, who would not drink

whiskey and ride after outlaws again.

Kenney rode to the first outlaw he had dropped and stared down. The man was young, brown-faced. He looked like any young cowboy asleep. Kenney shook his head and found the next victim. This man was older, with the lines of his vicious past on his hard mouth. Kenney muttered, "Alkili Sam—wondered what become of you. Hadn't heard since Dodge. Well, so-long, you no-good coyote."

He listened to the chatter of voices as the men of Oreville alibied themselves, then began building up the narrow escapes and close hits they would brag about for the ensuing weeks, and which some day would be handed down as heroic exploits to their descendants.

He had no right to judge them, he knew. He was a case himself. He was a man who disliked cows, yet had been a cowboy. He hated dull physical labor, yet he had been a miner. He was indifferent to cards, but he had been a gambler. And finally he was a man with interest and liking for others, yet he had, adorned with a five-pointed star, killed many men.

He was Walt Kenney, and they feared him and respected him in a country where those two traits were lacking in the main. But he had no aim, he had no goal, and he thought, riding away from the babbling posse, he had no future.

He went through the woods and presently came upon the scene of violence just past. Johnny One-Card was lying on the grass beside the road. Little Johnny, hard-bitten, tough, valiant, had tried to stand them off with his shotgun, and they had done for him. One horse was down; that was standard procedure with Fat Harry to make sure the stage stopped.

women prefer men who prefer

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Abner Dey was holding a girl in his arms. Tom Turner, hat in hand, was soberly standing by. The girl was not weeping. Her wide brown eyes were upon Johnny One-Card, but she was neither frightened nor appalled, Kenney saw.

Whip Mackey, tall, gaunt, a wad of tobacco packed into his jaw, said, "I swanny, Walt, they gettin' too cute. They hit the hoss. Then as Johnny reached for them they downed him from a tree."

Walt Kenney said, "I'll pack him in. He was my bunkie."

"Take my horse," said Abner Dey shakily. "I'll ride the stage with Norma. Oh, this is Walt Kenney, Norma dear. . . ."

She stood away, acknowledging the introduction with dignity. She was tiny, not more than five feet high. Kenney marvelled at her, the way she stood, feet slightly apart, shoulders square, head up, the brown eyes searching him.

She said, "Mr. Kenney. The famed lawman? You let them get away? They rode through you, didn't they?"

He bowed. "Yes, ma'am, they did that."

Dey said, "All but the two you shot, Walt. Come, dear, do not bait Mr. Kenney."

Tom Turner said in his light voice, serious now, "No, Miss Dey. Johnny was Walt's cabin-mate. Walt will take care of Fat Harry now, I think."

The girl did not flinch. She said in the same strong, direct voice, "I beg your pardon, Mr. Kenney. The suddenness of it, the cold-blooded killing of that nice little man—it seemed terrible to me that they should go unscathed."

Kenney nodded. "You're all right, Miss Dey." He turned abruptly away and picked up little Johnny. It was a light burden to sling over his saddle. The stage went away while he was at his task.

When he turned, Tom Turner was holding Dey's horse for him. Kenney said, "I thought you'd go with that peart gal."

Turner smiled soberly. "Later, perhaps. She's a winner. But now I'm thinking of other things. You'll be alone in the cabin now, Walt. Wonder if I could take Johnny's place?"

Kenney debated. He was careful of his sidekicks. Johnny had been an old-

timer, a good one. Then he perceived that beneath the surface there was something urgent, something of importance. He said, "What's the deal, pardner?"

Turner rode close. Whispering, though there was no one within a mile of them. "Walt, I'm undercover here. For Wells Fargo. Even Dey doesn't know it."

Walt said, "You can prove that?"

"At the bank," nodded Turner. "I can't carry the papers."

The lean man looked at the body dangling across his saddle. He said, "Why, Turner, I guess you got me. I was for pullin' outa this until Johnny was done in. Now, I guess you got me."

They rode into town, Johnny One-Card following them on the roan.

OREVILLE was another mining boomtown in the mountains. It was comfortably wide open, not like a cattle town where the Texans took over. It was, of its kind, a good town. The ore was plentiful, money was free. Had it not been for Fat Harry Lacey and his outlaws, Oreville would have run out its course, emptied the hills of metals, died comfortably without infamy.

But Fat Harry Lacey had taken over dilapidated Rawhide, over back of High Rocky, a ghost town, and Oreville has sorely beset. Not that Lacey raided the town. He was too canny for that. He set himself up against Wells Fargo. He hurt no man, woman nor child who did not work for Wells Fargo. He raided their stages, stole their currency or the bullion they toted out of Oreville—and waxed ever fatter and richer.

Wells Fargo could have hired a crew of gun-slingers to ride the stages, Walt Kenney reflected, eating his supper in the Chinaman's. But with competition cutting in, the company had fixed operation costs and good gunmen came high, and Fat Harry could wait out their departure in his stronghold, living off his gains and probably some cattle rustling. They could call in the troops, but that meant begging political favor—and bad damage to the company's prestige.

So they sent in an Eastern kid named Tom Turner. A greenhorn, against Fat Harry, who had with him Hob Cray, Snake Stevens, Lanky, Jake Hart and

Turkey and man others. Walt Kenney would have pulled out quickly—were it not for One-Card's demise.

He dug into his apple pie. A shadow fell across the table and he looked up at Tom Turner. The young man said, "I'm tired of our cooking, too."

"Got to have a change," said Walt Kenney. "Anything new?"

Turner said loudly, "I clipped the boys for a hundred today." In a dramatic whisper he added, "I'm going into Rawhide."

"Don't be a damned fool." Walt drank his coffee. Fat Harry had spies all over Oreville and Turner was silly to even talk in a whisper of his plans.

"The bullion's piling up. They've got two hundred thousand in bullion to ship out. And they've got to bring back pay for the men, you know that."

The Chinaman was standing beside them, grinning, bobbing his head, awaiting Turner's order. They had not heard his slipped approach. Kenney's face was inscrutable, staring at the Chinaman. Turner ordered.

When the Chinaman was gone, Kenney said sternly, "Don't ever talk business where there are people or walls. I ain't anxious to have a knife in my back some dark night."

Turner whispered, "I guess you're right. I'm just anxious."

He ate the food the waiter brought. He was bubbling with excitement, a large, handsome, blond boy.

Walt Kenney sighed. This was going to be rough. Turner had covered himself pretty well with his gambling and playing around. But to invade Rawhide, dare to attempt to fool Fat Harry Lacey, that was another matter.

When Turner was finished they strolled outside. On the edge of town, at a bare spot with not even a bush near at hand, Kenney said, "You've been livin' with me, that makes it double bad. Fat Harry knows me."

"That's just it," said Turner eagerly. "I'm going to pretend that I moved in with you to get the inside doings. Fat Harry must know you are connected through Dey with the plans of Wells Fargo."

"Yeah?" Kenney's voice was a drawl.

"Sure! So when I go and offer to divulge the plan, he'll think he's got the thing in his hands!"

"And you think he'll ride into a trap without a gun on your back? Fat Harry is smart."

"I'll chance that," said Turner.

"It's a dumb thing to do. Very brave, but dumb," said Kenney emphatically. "I can't help you none. I'm with yuh, but I can't."

"I know you and Dey got a plan of your own," said Turner a little stiffly. "I was hoping you'd confide in me and dovetail the two. I'm responsible to the president of the company, you know."

"I know. I seen your papers," said Kenney gently. "But the best plans are best kept. Fat Harry trained with the Apache. Supposin' he was to ketch on to you . . . it'd be plumb better you didn't know nothin' about nothin'!"

Turner said, "But I've got to know when the shipment is going or I can't mislead him."

"Then you'll have to get straight with Dey," said Kenney firmly. "If he wants to go along, that's his business."

"But you're in on it—"

Walt Kenney said, "How come you to be so sure, sonny?"

Turner flushed. "I have my sources of information. I'm not such a booby as you think."

"Okay," said Walt Kenney. "You play it your way."

Turner said, "This isn't very friendly of you, Walt."

"That's all right," shrugged Walt Kenney. "You take it how you feel it."

Turner said, "All right. I'm not angry, Walt, don't misunderstand. This just means a lot to me, that's all."

"Sure," said Kenney.

THE young man turned and walked toward the nearest gambling hall. He held his head high and walked with a free stride, unlike the rolling gait of the westerner. He was sure a fine-looking hombre, Kenney reflected as he melted into shadows and began a circuitous route which took him back of the house of Abner Dey where in another spot he waited the arrival of the Wells Fargo agent.

It was not so good, the word being out that he was working with Abner Dey. If Turner knew it others knew it. Kenney did not like this. Hunkered down on the level plain behind the town, he rolled a cigarette. He was about to strike a light when he sensed rather than saw the two horsemen.

That was the trouble with these meetings, he thought sardonically. In order to avoid eavesdroppers a man had to seek the open spaces. There was no cover when danger threatened. The two men were coming in slowly, taking their time. He was afoot and cut off from town. They had rifles, he had only his revolvers.

He threw a shell into the sixth chamber of each gun, reholstered the left-hand weapon. He dropped flat balancing the long-barrelled Colt's he had always favored, waiting. His ears told him the horsemen's direction. They were making very sure of him. Fat Harry would want him safely out of the way, all right. Two hundred thousand dollars was a huge stake.

Well, a man's life was a pretty good stake, too. He wished there was at least a clump of sage to throw a shadow in which he could maneuver. He thought the man on the south would come in first. The horse's drum-beat sounded closer. He measured the moment when they would know for sure he had detected their presence. That was when they would break, firing rifles. They would stay out of range, of course. It was not a pleasant thought.

The man on the north, strangely, ran in first. The hot lead sang its requiem. The moon, peering over the thudding clouds which ran a race over the top of serrated hills, threw a traitorous beam. The rider was coming in haste.

Walt Kenney waited, holding useless fire, poised. The flame of the gun from the south was a beacon too far in the night.

And then there was another shot. This came from the east. Walt Kenney swung, sweating a little. If there were three of them he had not a chance, and he knew it. Two might, by extreme luck, commit an error of timing; three could not miss.

And then the two were coming in close, making a dead run. The third gun smacked noise against Kenney's ear-drums. The

rider was humping, firing rapidly, without much aim, he thought. The two assassins were coming at him. He figured the range on the man for the southward way and fired a looping shot at the silhouette against the vagrant moon.

There was a howl. The pony swung and looped away. Walt Kenney swung his gun. The man in from northward was already drawing off. The rifle eastward spoke again.

Walt Kenney thumbed his hammer down. He revolved the shells in the chambers, set them on empty again. He stood up. The third rider came thundering in, swung down.

Norma Dey gasped, "Is it—are you all right?"

Walt Kenney drawled, "Miss, I never was righter. I'm alive, ain't I?"

She said, "Father warned me. He's ill, Mr. Kenney. He sent me to tell you he could not leave the house and you must come right away."

"He sent you out here, alone, with a rifle, to meet me?"

She said proudly, "I was raised here, Mr. Kenney."

Walt Kenney grinned in the moonlight which now came full to illumine them. "I reckon it's no sense usin' formal handles when you just done saved my life and I'm thankin' you profuse-like. Norma, you're a humdinger, and I mean that double."

She flushed. "That's a compliment, coming from you, Walt. I've heard tales about you."

"You didn't hear truth," he said ruefully. "There I was, jackpotted as a man can get—when you rode in. I had my warnin', too." He broke off. The girl made him positively garrulous, he thought, reproving himself.

As though she read his mind, she said, "Walt, before we go in, I want to ask you something. Can you tell me what dangerous errand Tom Turner is undertaking?"

Kenney said carefully, "Why, no ma'am, I can't."

She said earnestly, "I know he is not just a common gambler. And I think there is good in him. He is going away. A girl can sense these things. He'll be in danger."

Kenney said drily, "A boy lives like he does is always in danger, more or less, Norma. He reckons to take care of himself."

"You live with him. I thought you'd know." Her voice was disappointed, subdued.

Kenney said, "I reckon we better start back. You ride, I'll mosey alongside. How come you to ride this short distance, Norma? Like a cowboy crossin' the street t' git a shave—hossback!"

"Father has a premonition," she said soberly. "Father has a fever and is wrought up. I humored him—luckily."

"Uh-huh," said Walt Kenney. He was suddenly anxious to get to the agent. A hunch was one thing. Knowledge of a double cross or a leak of some kind was another. Abner Dey was no fool.

They came by the rear way to the house and stabled the pony. The girl trailed the rifle perfectly, and when they entered the low, rambling house on the edge of town Kenney noted she immediately swiped out the barrel. She was a Western girl, all right, with only the thin overlay of Eastern education to distinguish her from any other local product. A good girl for any man. For Tom Turner?

CHAPTER

2

Fat Harry's Mask

Abner Dey lay in the big bed and stared at Kenney. He said, "We've got to get that bullion out. Word's got around, and first thing y' know Lacey will be strikin' at us here. Above all we don't want townspeople hurt. That would bring in troops. Wells Fargo would get a blow

from which it would sure never recover."

Walt Kenney was looking at the girl. He said, "Reckon we've got to get some wagons and drive it out."

"But Fat Harry'll hit the wagons with all of Rawhide."

Kenney said, "Naturally. Got to expect him."

"But we haven't a chance of gettin' through against that mob. You know there ain't enough real men in Oreville to man a crew."

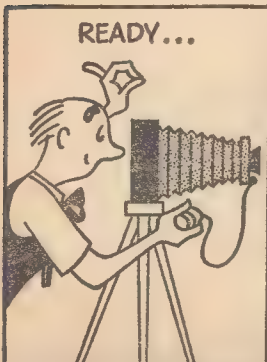
Kenney shifted his gaze to the man in the bed. His eyes were greenish and slanted, his long jaw close-shaven and hard. He was a tall man, wire-muscled, slouching, unimpressive at first glance. His voice was quiet, unruffled. "Abner, you better leave this to me. Looks like there's somebody givin' out information. You just lay there and take it easy 'til you feel better."

The older man said fretfully, "It ain't rightly your job, Walt, not the plannin' of it. I can't figure how we are goin' to. . ."

Kenney said, "I'll take over. You get well." He smiled. His lean face wrinkled into a suddenly youthful mask. The girl's eyes widened, then narrowed and an answering smile illuminated her features.

He walked out of the bedroom and she followed. She said, "What are you going to do, Walt? And what has Tom Turner to do with all this?"

He said slowly, "I don't rightly know, Norma. I'll be in touch with you." He took his wide brimmed hat and went out of the house. On the street he moved swiftly through the shadows, watching the likely places for an ambush. The Fat Harry gang had been tipped off—and he had not talked with anyone, not Tom



Turner, not anyone. It was a thing which worried him. He was accustomed to treachery, but usually he could put his finger on the traitor and deal with him—or her—accordingly.

The roan horse whinnied in the stable. Walt Kenney saddled up, then walked, leading the pony, to the rear of the cabin he had once shared with Johnny One-Card. He wanted a word with Tom Turner.

Turner was riffing a deck of cards by light of a lamp. He said restlessly, "I wish you'd tell me your plans, Walt."

Kenney said, "No plans. I'm ridin' out a couple days. Abner's sick. You better watch over him an' the gal." He watched Turner closely, but the young man's face did not change.

Turner said, "You're riding on Wells Fargo business?"

"Just ridin'," said Kenney gently.

Turner slapped the cards down on the table, but did not raise his voice. "All right. I'll go it alone. I thought you'd help after they killed One-Card."

Kenney said, "There's nothin' anyone can do, yet." He hesitated, then said slowly, "I wouldn't go to Rawhide if I was you. Not now."

"I'll have to be responsible for my own actions, to myself," said Turner with dignity.

"Okay." Kenney nodded pleasantly. "It's just that someone's spyin' close to Dey. Thought you might be interested in lookin' into that end."

Turner brightened. "You mean there's been a leak? That's something to work on. Now, if I only knew when you were shipping that bullion, I could make plans."

"Take it up with Dey," Kenney said again. "I'll be seeing you."

He went back to the roan, paused a moment and a slight scowl adorned his tight-skinned features. Then he was in the saddle, leaping lightly, without effort, and the roan cantered westward.

He gauged his timing and his distance and then swerved into the brush. He rode northward half an hour, swung back. He made a route cross country, parallel to Oreville. There was no road, but he had the topography of the country in his mind, from other excursions. He guessed the time at 10 o'clock, but did not stop to

check with his watch. He had slept well the previous night and was capable of riding through until dawn if need be.

Coming all the way down, eastward of Oreville now, he made for the forest which had been the background for the stage-coach hold-ups. He pulled the roan in under the black protection of the trees and sat for a moment. Then he tied the horse to a sapling, reached for a low limb and swung himself up into an oak.

The sounds of the woods became a murmur in his ears. He could have detected any other noise. No one had followed him in.

However, that did not mean that he had not been trailed from town. A smart man would not follow into a forest. He sighed and dropped to earth. Leaving the roan, he went out afoot, a job he hated, and quartered a circle, stubbornly taking his time, moving silent as a shadow. An hour of that and he was sweating in the chilly night air and had returned to the forest. Now he went in like a snake, gliding, seeking the roan.

He came to the horse without incident, but he was not satisfied. He rode out and swung even farther east before doubling back toward his real destination. He wished that he had found a man on his trail. He could have handled that and then he would have felt surer of himself.

Now he came in and there were still lights in the town he sought. Honest men slept, but in Rawhide there were always those who kept the night hours alive.

HE DID not dare ride in. The town was strictly one-street, with shacks lining the rotten boardwalks. Fat Harry Lacey was hardly a man to rebuild his headquarters into a livable community. Kenney had to leave the roan behind a lean-to on the southern edge of the town.

There were men moving, even at this hour, going from one lighted establishment to another, their laughter raucous, their gait swaggering. Tilting his sombrero down on the bridge of his nose, Kenney staggered against a tall man, was shoved off with a curse, giggled and slid between two of the largest shacks in town. The group he had joined went on, oblivious.

He muttered, "Snake Stevens—Hob

Cray—"They'd be closest to Fat Harry, I reckon." He lounged, watching them. The tall man had evil, close-set eyes and wore a Bowie in addition to his two low-slung revolvers. Hob Cray was short and squat and ugly. They swung into a cabin set apart from the others, as though suspicious of its neighbors.

Kenney lurched onto the boards. A woman's hoarse laugh sounded. A tinny piano jangled off-key. Fat Harry had all the perquisites of society for his men, all right.

The window was unshaded and Kenney removed his hat, peering cautiously over the sill. Fat Harry sat at a rough pine table and spoke to Stevens and Cray.

"So yuh can't find out, you and your tinhorn spies. Yuh can't learn nothing."

Stevens said, "I tell yuh Dey is sick and they've made no plans for movin' the stuff."

Cray growled, "And don't yap at us like thet, neither, Harry. By gar, we don't have t' take thet kinda talk."

Fat Harry Lacey weighed almost three hundred pounds. He had three chins, his face was a pudding, his eyes the raisins in the pudding. His hands were pudgy and soft as a baby's. But he made a sudden move and a three-legged stool was in his hand. His voice purred like a cat's meow, "I wouldn't kill either of you crawlin' scum-things. I wouldn't, because I need you to do the dirty work you're fit to do. But I'd jest as soon break your thick skulls a bit, to teach you a lesson."

Cray snarled, "Yuh'll break nothing." He fell slightly away, clawing at his guns.

Kenney watched with interest. Snake Stevens did not join the violent move of his short partner. He stepped aside and stood there, hands carefully still, observing the action with his narrow eyes hooded.

The stool whipped out with incredible speed. It left the suety hand of Fat Harry and sailed across the room. Hob Cray, alert, ducked. When his head came up he was staring into the muzzle of a revolver which appeared above the edge of the table. Fat Harry released the hammer. The sound of the shot was like a cannon going off in the small room.

Cray staggered, screaming. Stevens still had not moved. Blood streamed down

Cray's neck. He dropped his gun and clapped a hand to his right ear.

"Been watchin' you waitin'," said Fat Harry coolly. "Had this in yuh for quite a spell. Allus did think you were big stuff, didn't yuh, Cray? Waal—now you'll wear my mark. You've seen it on some of the others. I take you crumbs and sweep yuh together and make yuh rich and what happens? Everybody gets to thinkin' he's as tough as Fat Harry. Jest because I'm an old, fat easy-goin' man.

"Now I'm tellin' you both that I'll know when the bullion is moved, that yuh can quit yammerin' around with the people of Oreville that you think are your spies. You've failed again—and I've lined it up. Now, Snake, take him out and patch up his ear."

Stevens moved without a word. But the snake eyes slid once to a door at the rear of the shack as he ushered his moaning companion from the shack. Kenney flattened himself against the wall and waited.

When the footsteps of the two had wandered out of hearing, Fat Harry said, "All right, Jake."

The rear door opened. A huge man stood framed in it, grinning. Holding a sawed-off shotgun in his hands, Jake Hart said, "I watched through the crack. Ole Snake wasn't fooled none. Ole Snake's dangerous, Harry."

"But he knew you were there. Otherwise, I'd have finished him before I got Cray," grunted Fat Harry Lacey. "And I could do you in just as quick—and you with that greener in your hands."

"Mebbeso, Harry. But you ain't," said Jake comfortably. "You and me, we get bullion?"

"They don't know themselves," said Harry Lacey. "When they do we'll know." He chuckled, a fat man's merriment burbling from him. "Damnedest thing, Jake. Wells Fargo sent an undercover man down here. And when all that stuff piled up it sorta went to his head. He wants part of it!"

Walt Kenney gulped. Tom Turner had acted with lightning speed, it seemed. Without coming to Rawhide he had made his contact and offered his services.

Jake said, "Reckon he ain't gittin' any of it."

"I dunno," said Harry Lacey. "Could

be Cray and Stevens would have to go. This here boy might be better for us."

Jake said admiringly, "Harry, you shore think of everything."

Harry Lacey said, "If I can jest pile up enough. I got big plans. This here town, somethin' could be done with it. Git us enough good men— If there was some way of keepin' the troops out until we got a gov'ment goin' here. Mayor Lacey! How about that?"

At the end of the alley a voice not quite sober said, "Hey! What you doin' there, you?"

Walt Kenney fell away from the window. Letting himself roll against the wall, he stumbled and said, "Whatcha want, pardner? Drink, mebbe?"

The man was very tall and very thin. He came into the dark space next to the building chuckling. "That you, Spade? C'mon, yuh know Harry'll be sore if yuh hang around here. Come on."

A rough hand seized Walt's shoulder, hauled at him. Inside the shack Fat Harry's voice said sharply, "Bring that man here!"

The tall man said, "Now yuh done done it. Got to take yuh in there. Who in tarnation are yuh, anyway, dumb enough to—"

Walt Kenney's hand swiped up. In it was the Colt. The heavy muzzle stroked alongside the thin man's head. He went down into the dirt.

Fat Harry called, "Jake, see what Lanky's doin' with that drunk. I want him in here."

Walt Kenney turned the corner at the rear of the shack, waited. One blast from that greener would settle all his troubles, he well knew. The gigantic Jake Hart came swiftly out of the door.

Kenney's left hand clamped on the shotgun. His right slapped the gun-muzzle against the jawbone of the big man. He hauled back and struck again, careful not to underestimate Jake's strength. He felt the big frame sag and wrenched the gun away, tossing it into the back lot.

Fat Harry said sharply, "Jake! What goes there?"

IN A moment the whole town would be aroused. Kenney ran across the lots. He heard Fat Harry yell, heard

Snake Stevens say, "Looks like yore pet missed one this time."

"It's thet Kenney. It couldn't be nobody else. I tole you to git him!" Fat Harry's voice pealed. "I'm warnin' yuh, Kenney! I know yuh and yore number is up!"

Kenney whistled at the edge of blackness. The roan came trotting. The air was filled with gunshot as though a company of soldiers had turned loose upon command. Fat Harry howled, "After him! I want that Kenney dead!"

The roan stepped swiftly into the night. Fat Harry knew everything, all right. He knew about Kenney and the Wells Fargo deal. Harry Lacey had known about it all along. . . . It was strange how much Fat Harry knew about everything. . . . The roan unleashed its real speed and Walt Kenney rode low on his neck, bound for Oreville. He had a very uneasy feeling that Oreville might be no less dangerous to him now than Rawhide.

Abner Dey was pallid under his tan, but he was able to move. He said, "I dunno, Walt. You say Tom Turner's gone?"

"To Rawhide," Kenney nodded. "To double-cross Lacey. We got to assemble the wagons at the mines, not in town. Inside the shaft of each mine. And I want two sets of wagons, identical."

"Who'll drive 'em?"

"Whip Mackey's settin' out a stage run," said Kenney. "We load his wagons with empties, put brakes on 'em to make 'em drag like they were full. He's got two old boys to go with him. When the strike comes, they'll high tail it. In the wagon 'll be whoever we can get to work a rifle bolt."

"Who's goin' to drive the bullion through?"

"You and me," said Kenney grimly. "Who else?"

The girl said, "No! Father can't do it. He's too weak."

"I got to do it. I can't send men out against Fat Harry and not go myself. Walt knows that."

Kenney nodded. "Couldn't get an Oreville man to go if he didn't, Norma. They ain't too reliable, as it is."

She said, "But—oh, I know Tom's got

a plan. We ought to be acquainted with it."

"He's been gone three days," Kenney pointed out.

"We should have told him our plans!"

Kenney drawled, "How do you know we didn't?" His eyes fastened upon her and for once they were not warm with admiration.

She flushed. "He asked me if I knew. He said you wouldn't tell him and he needed to know—"

Abner Dey said restlessly, "He showed me his credentials and asked me for the plan, too. I couldn't give him what I didn't have."

Kenney said coldly, "An undercover man has to work that way, blind. Turner should know that. You get the wagons set, quick. I'm ready to go in the morning, before there can be a leak. Lacey has spies all over town—maybe even in the mines. Our only chance is to make him hit—and chase the wrong wagons at the turn in the road where the woods lay. Then we come through and have a clear run to Blue Valley, your guns and mine against any stragglers or anything that might go wrong."

Abner Dey said slowly, "It's a sensible plan. It takes nerve and timin'. And if it succeeds, Wells Fargo'll gain a heap of prestige."

"If it fails you'll both be killed," cried the girl.

Kenney said, "Whip Mackey can raise some sort of a crowd. You and me—we take the bullion through. Right?"

"Right," said Abner Dey grimly. "I'll have the wagons ready at dawn. I can hire men to work, if not to fight."

Walt Kenney nodded. He went out

into the night. He was walking on eggs, even here in Oreville, leaving the pleasant, woman-kept house of Abner Dey. Fat Harry Lacey wanted him out of the way. He went along the street opposite his cabin. There was a shadowy figure sloped into a dark corner.

Walt Kenney whistled, moved on. He slid into the hotel by the back door. He had a room with a view of the street and one door in which he was sleeping this night. After a moment there was a tap on the portal and he said, "Is that you, Mackey?"

"Yup," said the lean stage coach driver.

They sat in the darkened room, smoking. Mackey said, "Eve'rything all set, Walt?"

Kenney said, "My part's nothing. How about you?"

"Got me a couple hard rocks from the mines. Give 'em a hundred dollars like you said. I got a couple hundred left. Seems like Wells Fargo's layin' it out secret but plentiful, huh?"

"One nice thing about you," said Kenney. "You don't expect me to answer questions."

"Keerect," grinned Mackey. "I'll take my boys up to the mines. You got plenty nerve, Walt. Looks like you're bankin' heavy on a thing you ain't sure of."

"Mebbeso," nodded Kenney. "Cover yourself all the way, Whip. There's murder in this town."

"I got them boys follerin' me," chuckled the old driver. "I got the fastest hosses this side o' the Rockies. Man, this here is the most fun since the 'Paches use to hit us every day we handled a ribbon." He slipped out, a gaunt, indomitable relic of older, tougher days.



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AT DAWN the wagons were assembled. Whip Mackey's "boys" proved to be a couple of squat, middle-aged men, tough as hard rock. The others, from the town, were the usual town gunmen, neither brave nor abjectly cowardly, just ordinary men who needed money.

Abner Dey was pale but resolute. He said, "How did you raise so many men? Seems like you get more results than anybody I ever seen, Walt."

"You take the flat wagon," said Walt. "They go out first. We got to assume that Lacey will hit the first wagons and not know about us coming along behind. You go ahead, in the second train, I follow. And don't fail to do as I told you, when we get to High Rocky."

"I'm ready," said Dey. He walked over to the pair of wagons which were half hidden, even in this desolated gray of morning. Whip Mackey and his men were taking the first wagons out noisily, making no attempt at concealment.

Whip said, "Be seein' yuh in Blue Valley. We're a-goin', Walt. Be keerful—and if yuh miss, I'll bury yuh right!"

Dey muttered, "Seems like they're in more danger 'n us."

"Does seem that way," said Walt. "Remember about High Rocky. Go ahead. Keep a quarter mile back of their tail wagon. Don't expect anything—keep your mind open and drive the hides off the hosses when the shootin' starts."

"Maybe Lacey won't get wind of this. Maybe we'll get through."

"Do not believe that," Kenney said sharply. "Lacey will hit the wagons."

"I thought there might be a chance—" Dey gripped a shotgun. "This is the biggest shipment ever sent by Wells Fargo. It means my life, Walt. I've done well with the company. I wouldn't want to start over."

"Take that wagon through and you'll be regional manager," said Kenney. "I'll be right behind you."

He walked to the wagon he had selected for himself. It was the heaviest and most unwieldy, but he had good horseflesh in the harness. He tightened a loose end of tarpaulin. Whip and the others would be grinding on the road by now.

He was, he knew, taking a huge risk that his judgment was correct. His in-

structions to Mackey and to Dey were based on something more than a guess—but a whole lot less than knowledge. His trip to Rawhide, his eavesdropping on Lacey had led him to an opinion which he now was backing with the lives of men. The bullion, as such, meant nothing to him. Mine owners were rich men in Eastern cities. The people of Oreville, Abner Dey, Whip Mackey, these were tangibles. These were people, doing a job, facing odds. The job had to be done, they were essaying it, Walt Kenney was assuming terrible responsibility.

Yet his face was calm, his pulse strong and steady as he swung to the seat and picked up the reins. Abner Dey's wagon moved into the lightening east. Kenney's four horses bent willingly to the straps. Wheels creaked, the wagons groaned. The shotgun and the rifle lay at Walt's knee. His revolvers rested snugly in their holsters. The die was cast, the battle, so far as he was concerned, could be joined any time.

Dey kept straight on the road, head high, back straight. The man was brave, Kenney reflected. Up ahead Whip Mackey's cortege would be nearing the first dangerous spot, High Rocky. Kenney strained his ears. There was no sound in the pink, growing light of dawn save an early bird singing upon a mesquite bush and the shrilling of the wagon wheels.

They rumbled along. The first wagons should be past High Rocky and nearing the forest. Kenney dragged the line, waiting, listening. No untoward sound came to him.

Dey turned, making of his leanness a human question mark. Kenney raised his whip, gesturing. His wrist snapped and the lash whined over the head of his horses. They moved faster. Up ahead Dey increased his speed.

They were going at a good clip when they made the swing at High Rocky. Dey went out of sight, then Kenney's wagon was thundering around the curve. The first rifle shot sounded on time, just as Kenney had surmised.

A figure tumbled. The horses attached to Dey's wagon went on. Another shot and they stumbled, one down. The wagon careened. Men rode out of the morning at Dey's wagon. The horses pranced and

neighed, driverless, the harness a tangle.

Fat Harry Lacey had not hit Whip Mackey's wagons. He had waited for the second, supposedly secret caravan carrying the gold.

They were coming at Kenney. He held onto the ribbons, trusting to the uncertain light and his skill as a driver. He whipped his vehicle to the right. He bent low, unfastening buckles. The traces fell suddenly loose, the backing straps had been adjusted so that he could manage them from the pole. Crouching with one arm over the dash he hung onto the shotgun and rifle and turned the four horses loose on the road.

The wagon bore down on the tumbled equipment of Abner Dey. There was a tremendous crash and a voice yelled, "That done fer thet blankety Kenney. C'mon in and git the stuff!"

Kenney, having leaped on the far side, was rolling. He held stubbornly to the shotgun. Men rode from the trees, whooping. He braked his sliding fall with a knee. He steadied himself there. The greener came up.

They were on him, two wild-riding Rawhide ruffians. He let go one barrel, swept the gun back. He fired the second as an amazed outlaw threw down on him with a rifle.

The first man went backwards out of the saddle, from the terrific burst of the shotgun. The second screamed and rolled in the saddle.

Fat Harry Lacey's voice called, "Don't ride in, none of yuh. Kenney's holed up. Yuh only got the fool agent."

Kenney moved with the wreckage of the two wagons. He found a spot which was covered from direct fire. He whispered, "You all right, Abner?"

Dey's voice was calm now that danger was at hand, tangible. "Yep. They shot hell outa thet dummy you made me rig. But I'm holed up good in here."

Kenney said, "Don't fire a shot until we're rushed. Let 'em think I'm alone."

Dey said, "I can't figure how you knew it, Walt. You were plumb right. But how did you know?"

"I didn't know. I don't like knowin'," said Kenney slowly. A man showed his head among the trees across the road. Kenney fired a quick shot. The man

ducked back, his hat rolling on the leaves. Howls went up and voices screamed imprecations.

Dey said grimly, "I don't rightly see how we're goin' to get out of this, neither. But I'm with yuh, Walt. All the way."

A voice said faintly, "If you give me a gun, I'll help."

Kenney almost jumped out of his skin. From under the tarpaulin he had fastened a head was protruding. Norma Dey's hair was tousled and one eye was slightly blackened. She said, "I didn't know you were going to wreck the wagon, Walt. It knocked me out, I'm afraid. But I knew you were planning something I wanted to see. I made a guess—and I'm partly responsible for this."

Kenney snapped, "You're a—" He caught himself.

Abner Dey finished it, "A silly, senseless, fool girl! Norma Dey, this is the dangedest, idiotic—" He almost sobbed. Gunfire commenced, shrewdly directed by Fat Harry Lacey. Bullets whistled through the tangled wreckage of the wagons. Dey seized his daughter and roughly threw her down. Even then, Kenney noted, her small hand was reaching for the spare rifle.

He said softly, "Well, she's here. Like she says—if you're responsible you gotta see it through. Give her the gun, Abner. This'll be a hot spot for us—but the bul-lion'll get through." He was thinking of the night she had ridden out and scared off two of Fat Harry's men, saving Kenney's life. She was young, a little foolish, she had been mistaken. But so had Kenney been mistaken, many times in his life.

CHAPTER

3

A Private Fight

The sun shone brightly. Kenney alone had stood them off. Dey held a canteen of water to him and he drank. The agent said, "I could picked off two, three of 'em, Walt."

"Your time'll come," said Kenney. "How you makin' it, Norma?"

"I'm scared," said the girl calmly. "Fat Harry takes his time. He's smart. He's countin' on one bullet getting you and then he'll come in at his leisure."

Kenney nodded. "He knows I'll let

loose the greener if they rush. That means two men for sure and maybe more."

The wreckage of the sturdy wagons curled about them. Kenney, moving in a small orbit, was well enough protected except from a direct hit. So far there had been no marksman who could pour a bullet into the only cracks in the defense. Yet at any moment it could happen, he knew.

He was counting on impatience, but Fat Harry seemed not to be afflicted with that dangerous flaw. The outlaws were keeping to cover, taking pot shots. It was a siege.

Darkness, he knew, would be fatal to them. But on the other hand Fat Harry could not wait that long to move in. Whip Mackey would be at Blue Valley, telling his story. . . .

Down the dusty road a cloud appeared. It came closer. Two of Fat Harry's men rode out at the edge of the woods to the west. Kenney loosed a bullet after them, but they were out of range. They hammered along to intercept the rider.

Norma Dey said, "If only the man gets away! We might be relieved, if he gets back to Oreville—"

"You think they'd come out and battle this gang?" Abner Dey shook his head. "We'd have had men here if we could have got them."

Kenney was watching. The lone rider suddenly turned off the road. His horse was amazingly fast. One of the two who were after him was Lanky, Kenney could tell by his height. The man fired a shot and Lanky tumbled from his horse.

Kenney grunted. The second man was going in. The rider from Oreville fired again. The second man went down. The rider disappeared at the edge of the road.

Time passed. Norma said, "He got away."

"Uh,huh. He sure did," said Kenney. They waited. Rifles crackled and lead hummed unpleasantly close.

There was a loud shout. Kenney whirled to the south. Gunfire thundered. A rider was coming in.

The man was hatless, his blond hair waving. He flung himself down from the horse, letting it race past. He tumbled over the wheels and behind the wagon body, panting, scratched, bruised, but

alive. Tom Turner said, "You wouldn't tell me, so I had to come and find out."

Kenney said, "Uh-huh. So I see."

Abner Dey started to speak, stopped. Norma stared at the young man, biting her lip. Turner sat up, felt for his revolvers. He had lost his rifle in his mad plunge.

The undercover man said, "You got the gold in these wagons?"

Kenney lifted an eyebrow at Dey. The agent said, "Looks like we been delivered, Walt."

"Could be," said Walt Kenney.

Turner said, "I've been in Rawhide. I know these men. They thought until last night I was throwing in with them. Then I had to pull out. But I got lost and didn't get to town to tell you what I'd learned until too late."

"What did you learn?" asked Kenney gently.

"That they had information from a dozen sources in town. They knew when your wagons were leaving, that you had two sets of them, that the gold would be in this one, not with Whip Mackey."

Kenney said, "They sure got their information. Who gave it?"

"Who knew?" asked Turner flatly.

"Abner—and Norma—"

"Norma?" he seemed suddenly to realize that the girl was present. He said, "Norma—you shouldn't be here."

"Amazing deduction," said Walt wryly. "You see she felt partly responsible."

"Norma?" Turner lifted a revolver and fired at a shadow among the heavy foliage at the edge of the forest. "Thought I saw Fat Harry. A smart hombre, that one, Walt. How could Norma be responsible for anything?"

Walt Kenney said, "They're beginning to gather for the rush."

"Yeah," said Abner Dey. "I can tell that."

"They're not firin'. Fat Harry's givin' them the pitch," said Walt Kenney. "In a minute they'll be on us."

Tom Turner said impatiently, "How can you tell these things, Walt? How can you always know?"

"That's botherin' Fat Harry right now," said Kenney. "Bothers you a heap, don't it, Tom?"

Turner said, "I've been working my

head off to learn things that you seem to guess. It does worry me, Walt. In fact, if you weren't here right now, I'd be wondering a lot about you."

"Now ain't that somethin'?" Kenney cocked an eye at Dey. "I expect you'd be makin' a report to the main office of Wells Fargo that I was throwin' in with Fat Harry."

"Well, not exactly," smiled Turner. He held his revolver loosely in his right hand. "But you've been so mysterious, it's been puzzling to me."

NORMA held the rifle at her hip. She was wearing tight-fitting levis and walking boots and a man's shirt too big for her. The discolored eye gave her a gamin-like appearance which was comical, but her mouth was set in a hard line.

The girl said, "It's been puzzling me, too. Why Walt bothers to let you gabble."

Turner wheeled. He was very large and strong and quick. The gun jerked in his hand. His eyes flamed with a sudden light. He said, "You—you've been talking about me."

Almost with regret Walt Kenney stepped forward. His own revolver prodded into Turner's spine. He said, "Drop it, Tom. Drop it and if you open your mouth I'll kill you right now."

There was a frozen moment of silence. Fat Harry's men seemed to be waiting the signal to attack. Then Turner's revolver dropped to earth in the close quarters within the wagons.

Kenney said, "That was a neat trick, coming in from town, shooting Lanky out of the saddle. Tell you what, Tom, if Lanky turns up dead I'll apologize and let you loose." He was whipping Turner's

hands behind him, tying them with a piece of rope from the tarpaulin.

Turner said thickly, "You're making a mistake, Walt."

"Like I say," Kenney nodded. "I'll say I'm sorry. Only right from the start, when the posse was out, you were shootin' high and wild into them trees. Then you rode in and were too long comin' back out. Then I knew Lacey didn't want the mail—he wanted Johnny One-Card. Like he wanted me, only you never had the nerve to try me, even when you thought I was asleep. I watched for that. I'd have finished you then if you'd tried it."

Turner said, "This is preposterous. I'm an undercover man—"

"Who goes around telling people. Like you told Norma. And sold her the idea that you had a right to know which wagon contained the bullion today," nodded Kenney. "And she believed you. That's why she's here, in danger of her life. She told you these wagons would contain the gold."

Turner said, "How could she have when I was in Rawhide?"

"The Chinaman," Kenney reminded him. "Or some other spy. Norma will tell. She thought the spies were yours, not Lacey's."

"It was the Chinaman," said Norma bitterly. "I couldn't believe Sam was with Lacey."

Abner Dey drawled, "Walt's no detective. Nor yet an undercover man. He's just actin' shotgun messenger for Wells Fargo. But we figure to use our heads out this way, Turner."

The big young man's mouth twisted. He said stubbornly, "It's a tissue of lies."

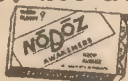
"After it's over we'll check back," said



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Walt indifferently. "Meantime, just lay down and rest, Tom." He tripped the large young man expertly and snapped a rope around his ankles. He whipped off his bandanna, made a ball of it, accepted another from Norma. He gagged Turner and rolled him under a broken wagon seat. He said, "It's about time for them to rush. They'll give Turner a few minutes, then they got to come in, signal or no."

Dey said, "They'll come from all directions, Walt." He was sweating a little in the hot sun, a lean brown man with a shotgun in his hands, a rifle by his side, two revolvers strapped to him. He was not a gun-slinger, not a fighter; he was a businessman. But he was ready, and beside him his daughter stood waiting for whatever was to come, head high, unafraid.

Norma said, "I'm sorry, but he fooled me. I've been East too long, perhaps. He said his way would save lives and money. I believed him. He showed me his credentials. . . ."

"Two hundred thousand dollars have whipped better men," said Kenney briefly. "He fooled me, too, until I began checkin' back and thinkin' about how smart Lacey is. Even then I wasn't positive until Lanky made that phoney fall back up yonder just now. That fitted into it perfect. That was a Fat Harry touch."

"You knew I told him, but you didn't say anything to me," she said flatly.

"Your father knew, too," Kenney reminded her. "It wasn't him. Nor me. But you were seein' Turner."

She said thoughtfully, "So you gave me the wrong information."

"Sure," drawled Kenney. He tilted his hat over the bridge of his slightly twisted nose. He was estimating the strength of the attackers, trying to guess Fat Harry's thoughts at the moment. "Gave everybody the wrong idee. 'Cepting Whip Mackey. If those other fellers knew they were ridin' on two hundred thousand dollars there's no tellin what they might do!"

She said, "I've been an awful fool."

Abner Dey snapped, "That you have, daughter. Now mind you shoot straight."

"Take the south side," Kenney said quietly to her. "Aim low. Don't shoot

unless you got a target. Abner, you watch the north. I'll take care of the road and that spot over there." He gestured toward a break in the trees from whence a full charge in force could be launched.

Abner Dey said, "Wish they'd come. Waitin's hardest."

"Sure," nodded Kenney. "But think of Turner. It's worse on him than us!"

Dey chuckled. "That's right. Never thought of that."

Norma's hands were steady enough. Kenney held the rifle. He hoped to get in an early shot with it. Then they would be close enough for shotgun work. It would be murder—and any single shot from an outlaw gun could wipe out one of the three defenders. He made light of it to the others, but each knew the danger.

Yet each knew the bullion was through, in Whip Mackey's wagons, and that was the job they had set out to accomplish.

Abner Dey's voice was quiet. "Here they come."

KENNEY watched the girl. This was the moment. She crouched behind the bulky rear of one of the wagons, using the tailgate for a rest, her rifle aimed at the south. Reassured, he turned. There was no wild yell, no recklessness in the charge.

Fat Harry's men rode low, circling like Indians. They came zigging and zagging, taking their shots with care. Unable to arise, pinned down, Abner and Kenney did not respond to the fire.

Hob Cray howled, "The kid's got 'em! Come on in!"

The squat man wheeled his horse and rode. He was hurtling straight for the barricade, his revolvers blazing. Walt Kenney said, "I got this one."

He delicately squeezed the trigger of the Winchester. Hob Cray stood higher in his stirrups than ever before. Then his yell went into a high scream and he fell, one foot tangling in the stirrup, dragging his bulky body along the uneven earth.

Fat Harry's bass boomed, "They got Turner! Haul off! Come back!" He was safe in the woods, awaiting the kill. He was brave enough, but he was the leader and knew his value.

Four of them were riding from the

south. Six came from the north. The others were the elite of the gang, and they came from the break in the trees which Kenney had indicated. Some tried to obey Lacey. Others would not, or could not. Kenney said, "Now!"

He led his shots into the melee of outlaws as though shooting for turkeys at a frontier outing. He downed one man, another, with the rifle. Snake Stevens, trying to extract himself, could not control his mount. Coldly, steadily, Kenney shot him through the body. Snake fell without a word and Fat Harry bawled again.

Two men got close. Kenney lifted the shotgun and let go with both barrels.

Abner Dey was bleeding. Norma was shooting at men retreating southward. There were bodies of the attackers all over the terrain. Fat Harry had counted too much on the doublecrossover, the undercover man from Wells Fargo.

Again Kenney turned to his own sector. In the woods Jake Hart was begging Fat Harry to make one more charge. Kenney lifted the rifle and fired at the voices until it was empty.

Fat Harry cried, "'Tain't no use. Haul off. Come through this way, every damn one of you." Hoofs sounded, diminishing through the trees.

Abner Dey said, "Jest a flying' splinter, Norma baby." The girl was tearing at her shirt for a bandage. Dey was grinning through the trickle of blood which ran down from a head wound. "They done quit, Kenney, my boy."

Walt said, "They pretty near done got wiped out." He counted bodies. Men groaned in the woods, but he had no compunction for them. They were murderers and worse. He swung over the side of the tilted wagon.

Then he paused. "Where is Turner?"

The three stared. Turner was gone!

Kenney examined the rope ends left on the ground. "A lucky bullet cut his hands loose! The rest was easy—except he didn't have the nerve to tackle us. Got away durin' the last charge." There were riderless horses all over the place. Kenney swung down and caught the rein of a likely looking chestnut. He called, "You two grab hosses and get back to town. Bring a posse to Rawhide."

"Where are you going?" It was the girl, almost wailing.

Kenney paused to look down at her. Both were grimy and blackened from sweat and black gunsmoke. He drawled, "After Fat Harry. And Jake Hart—and Tom Turner."

"Not now," she urged. "The law can handle them later."

"This here is a private fight," grinned Kenney. "I had to run from Fat Harry—and I don't like traitors!" He kicked the chestnut and turned its head for Rawhide.

It was afternoon when he came to the edge of the outlaw town. No one was on the streets. He rode in. He rode smack down the one street, looking right and



left, his sombrero cocked to one side. No one challenged him.

At the remembered shack the horses were tethered. He heard Fat Harry's booming bass, cursing. He heard Jake Hart's softer accents.

He dismounted and walked stiffly to the doorway of the cabin. His knee was wrenched from his fall. He favored it, leaning against the jamb. He said, "All right. You can come in or take it here."

There were only three of them. There

was Hart, there was Fat Harry—and there was Lanky, unscratched except by his tumble from the running horse.

Fat Harry yowled, "I told you he'd come!" He was scrambling for his gun. His draw was not so neat and quick as when he had pulled it on Hob Cray and Snake Stevens. His eyes were glazed with fear as he stared at Walt Kenney. Fat Harry had been outwitted and outfought and he knew it.

For the first time since he had come to Oreville territory Walt Kenney made his draw. One moment he was relaxed in the doorway. The next his right hand was down, then up, and a shot blasted Fat Harry in his chair.

Jake Hart was against the wall, raising a revolver. Kenney shot him almost carelessly.

Lanky had not drawn. He stood with hands half-raised, and his voice was full of resignation. "I ain't fightin' the devil himself for no man. Besides, I seen you in Dodge that time."

"Good," said Kenney cheerfully. "I wanted you alive." He was watching Fat Harry. The huge man was slumped in the chair, but there was life in him.

Lacey said, "Out-figgered me, that's what I can't get. I reckoned to be the smartest man in the Territory. Can't understand it."

Kenney said, "You did pretty good. Turner was the weak spot."

"Yeah—dirty turncoat—never trusted him," said Fat Harry. His head drooped. "Allus hated that kind."

Lanky said, "That'll be all of Fat Harry. He was a plumb good man, in his day."

"And in his fashion," said Kenney. "Let's ride, Lanky." He took the man's guns. They went outdoors. It was a very sunny day. They rode for Oreville.

Lanky said only one thing en route. "You got Turner?"

"No. Not yet," replied Kenney. They rode on in silence.

O REVILLE was in a holiday mood. The posse was just forming as Kenney rode in, his prisoner ahead of him. The constable took over, bustling with importance, incarcerating the lugubrious, silent outlaw.

Abner Dey, cleansed and bandaged, said, "Whip Mackey's in. He said you gave him several hundred dollars. That wasn't right, Walt. You shouldn't use your money. We'll repay it, of course, but you shouldn't have."

Kenney grinned. "You think I'd do this for money? Where is Norma?"

"At the house."

Kenney said, "I'll be seein' you—later." He strode around the corner. He was not really worried, yet he knew there was trouble. He slid to a stop behind a flowering bush in the yard of the neat house which the agent had built.

Through an open window came Norma's voice. "So you fooled me? And now you come sneaking back, trying to get help. You didn't have the nerve to hit the road. You haven't got any kind of nerve. You're a full-sized picture of a sneak, a snake and a yellow dog fawning on its belly for scraps."

Tom Turner said, "You don't understand, Norma. I wasn't really turning coat. I want you to make Kenney believe that. You and I are different from these people. They're hard—like rock. Maybe I went about it wrong, but—"

She said, "You went about it right as far as you could go. With me, that is. You fooled me, all right, almost until it was too late. Do you know my father might have been killed today? Do you know Walt Kenney might have been killed?"

He said with a show of spirit, "Kenney put you in that spot. And anyway, you didn't have to sneak into the wagon."

"I didn't?" She laughed bitterly. "After I figured it out? After I got over being impressed with your Eastern ways and your credentials and got to believing, as Walt believed, that you were merely a double-crossing crook?"

Turner said, "Then if you won't believe me, at least give me a gun and a horse. I'll go. I'll make my way, somehow."

"The brave young man," she laughed.

Kenney moved, then. He knew that there was one thing it was unsafe to do, even to a coward, and that was to laugh. He came from behind the bush and ran to the door. He heard her cry out.

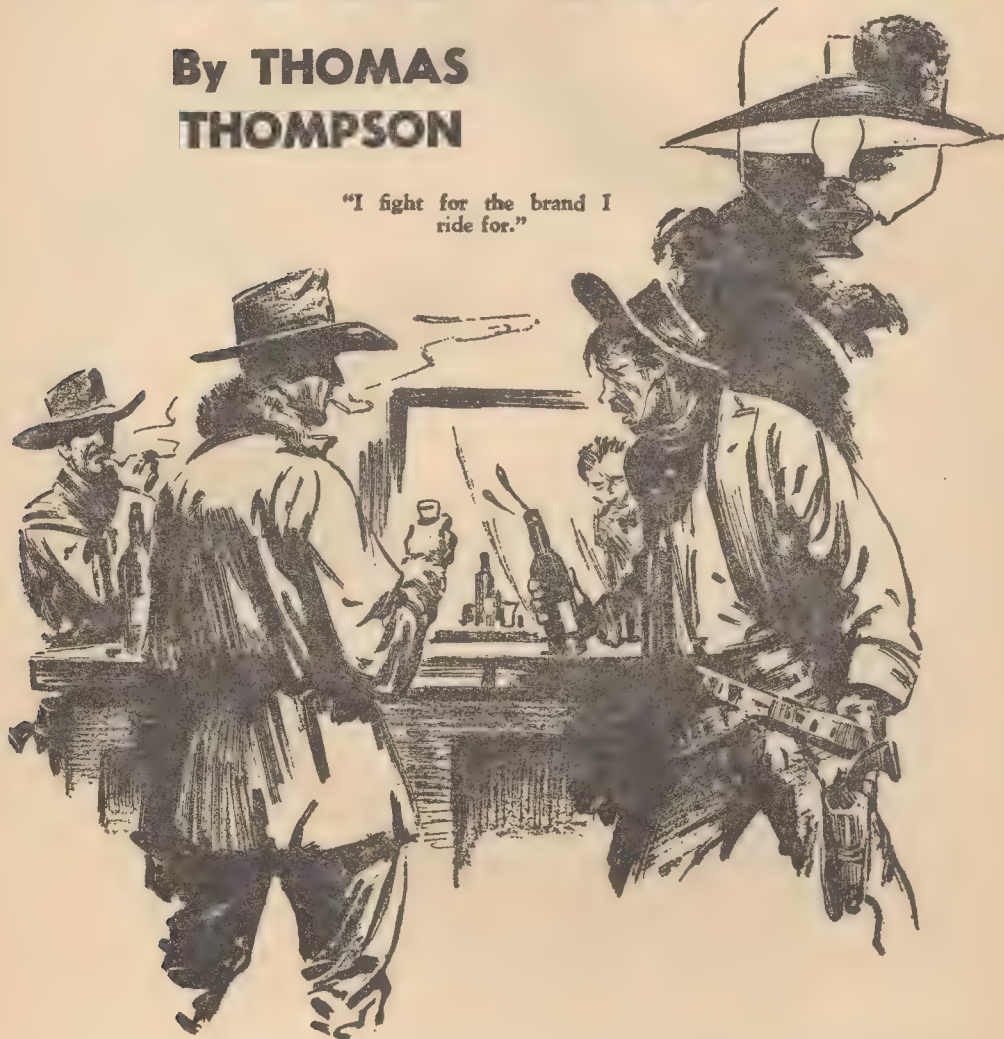
Then Kenney was in the house. Turner

(Please continue on page 96)

TAME THAT HELL-CAT!

By THOMAS THOMPSON

"I fight for the brand I ride for."



It wasn't Al's fight—but when a cowman's defendin' what's right, he's got a right to pull iron.



THEY came out of the doctor's office together and he helped her into the new buggy and as he walked around the rig to climb in himself he saw the men standing there watching him and he knew what they were thinking. *You can't tame*

a wildcat, they were saying to themselves. How long is it going to last?

He climbed into the buggy and adjusted the buffalo robe over his wife's knees then took the whip and flicked it lightly against the sorrel's rump. He said, "A woman

makes an awful change in a man, Maxine."

She was smiling a worried smile. "Are you sorry?"

He turned his head quickly and kissed her cheek. "What do you think?"

She said, "I'm proud of you, Al. Terribly proud."

Al Santee only half heard. A wagon had turned into the main street of the troubled town. It looked like Finney's outfit. It was empty, but the family was along. He saw that Finney was closely followed by another wagon and while he was looking two more came into sight. They were weathered rigs and the spokes made a cracking sound in the wooden hubs as the wheels turned slowly.

These were neighbors of his, nesters who had squatted on the flats up back of Galen Orr's mammoth Mashed O. The dust lifted some and he saw Finney's face. It was bruised and mashed and there was caked blood at the corner of the nester's mouth. Finney's wife was on the seat beside him. She was crying. Al Santee felt the muscles of his face tighten. He said, "He's done it, Maxine. Damn it, he's done it."

He saw the small lines of fear around her mouth and there was a smudge under her eyes that he hadn't noticed before. She gripped his hand tightly. "You're not sure, Al. You're only guessing."

They pulled alongside the second wagon. It was Hoover's and the four kids were there with blankets pulled around their shoulders. He saw Abbie. She was sixteen now and until two days ago she had been taking long walks in the evening with young Billy Parcell. They had made a cute couple, those two kids. Now Billy Parcell was dead and a Mashed O rider was in jail and there was trouble making here that would be too big to handle unless a man was cut out for trouble. Al waved his hand and Hoover stared straight ahead.

The Parcell wagon was next and Herb Parcell was gripping the lines with both hands and his wife, her face white, was staring straight ahead seeing nothing. In the back of the wagon the two youngest kids were whimpering some. Maybe they were thinking of Billy.

The Parcell wagon rolled on by and Al couldn't stand it any longer. He pulled

his buggy directly in front of the Stokes team. Reb Stokes pulled up sharp, cursing once, as he always did. Al said, "What's it all about, Stokes?"

Reb Stokes said, "What the hell's it to you, cowman? You wouldn't care no how."

The other wagons had stopped suddenly for a pack string that was crossing the street. Their stopping made a sudden silence and the voices of the two men carried. Abbie Hoover heard. She stood up and the blanket dropped from her shoulders. She was young, full of life and her voice sounded too old for her years. "I'll tell you what it is," she said. "We've had a fire at our place and some say it was an accident and some say not. Now I guess we're quitting because nobody has got guts enough to stand up to the things Billy died for."

Maxine said, "Abbie, you mustn't."

"No, I mustn't," the girl said. "This is Galen Orr's country and everything has to be done the way he says. It was all right for them to kill Billy. He's only one dirt farmer. But my Billy wasn't afraid to stand up and fight."

Al put his arm around his wife's shoulder and he felt the shudder going through her body. The doctor had said she should be quiet now. He thought, *You've seen all this before, Maxine. You lost two brothers and a father this way and you haven't forgotten. You've seen it too many times and I promised you you'd never see it again—*. Stokes said, "Get your rig out of my way, Santee. You ain't no part of this."

No, that's right, Al thought. *I'm no part of it*. But he couldn't help thinking of Galen Orr and the arrogant way the cattleman sat his saddle and he couldn't help thinking of Dayton and four other men who rode by Orr's stirrup. He had known some of those men down along the border and he had lived in places where one man ran everything. Maxine was crying softly and he worried about her. She said, "Darling it's been coming for a long time. It was coming before we got here. Galen Orr has nothing against us—"

Her voice was getting hysterical and he thought of how the doctor had told him she must have quiet and no excitement. He said, "Honey, don't let it upset you

so." He flicked the whip against the sorrel and they went down the street in an easy, jogging trot.

He didn't look back but he could feel the eyes of the nesters between his shoulder blades. He saw the single rider coming at a full gallop there ahead and he pulled aside to let the horseman by.

The rider pulled up sharp and the horse slid to a stop in the deep, cold dust then started prancing sideways. It was Dayton and his face was bruised and flushed and his voice thick.

"I've come to see them damn wagons keep right on movin'. They want trouble, all of them. I went over there today and that damn Finney tried to throw me off the place. Maybe they think there'll be a lynching or something, damn their eyes!"

"Pete caught that damn Parcell kid skinnin' a Mashed O cow. I knowed it was coming, sure as hell. It was a fair fight and Pete's in jail. What the hell more do they want?"

Al said, "Watch your language."

Maxine said, "It's all right, darling. Everybody's upset—"

Al had trouble with his hands. They were tight as if they were trying to make into fists. He slapped the lines and the buggy cut out around the rider and went on down the road. Dayton was standing in his stirrups yelling. "We ain't puttin' up with no damn nester outfit eatin' off our beef. If they want trouble they'll get it!"

Al looked at Maxine and her face was white. Perhaps the lines at the side of her mouth were plain lines. He pulled the robe a little tighter around her and he said, "Galen's trying to start it, Maxine."

Her lips had lost their color. "It's their

affair, Al," she said in a tight voice.

He didn't sleep well that night and he told himself it was because of Maxine. There was an aching feeling in his legs and when he would doze off his legs would twitch and that would awaken him and he would lie there, staring up at the dark ceiling, hoping he hadn't disturbed her. When the light came in the window finally he saw that it was a low, gray morning. He turned toward her. "Are you feeling all right this morning?"

She smiled at him and her hand touched his cheek. "I'm feeling fine, Al."

He said, "You won't be afraid to be alone, will you? I'd like to ride up in the north pasture. I want to look at the fences there."

She said, "Sure, Al. It will be good for you to be out and about." She always understood him.

He fixed the breakfast and brought it in to her on a tray. She laughed at him and got up and put on the robe he had bought her. She said, "I'm not an invalid. A wife should have breakfast at the table with her husband."

HE ATE slowly and had an extra cup of coffee, hating to leave, yet knowing he had to go. There was cold in the air and he put on his sheepskin lined coat and turned the collar up around his ears. When he rode out of the corral the air was sharp in his nostrils and he could see the steam from his own breath and from the horse's.

He rode slowly, not in a hurry, and he saw that there was a lot of strength in the frost cured grass. His barn was full of meadow hay and there was a good stack which he had roofed over against

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the rain and snow that would be here soon. He would have no trouble feeding through the winter and next spring there would be a half a hundred two year olds to sell after he topped them off on spring graze.

His thoughts were of cows and he was a cowman. His place was small, but he was not a dirt farmer like Finney and Hoover, Parcell and Stokes. He was a cowman just as Galen Orr was a cowman, and because of it he would fit into Galen Orr's scheme of things.

He topped the ridge and looked down to where the four nester shacks had stood close together on the corners of their land. There were three there now and where the other had stood there was a blackened rubble and an iron bedstead was alone and twisted with heat. He saw the girl standing there looking at the ruin. The wind caught her blonde hair and tossed it around her face and he saw her pull her coat tighter as protection against the bite of the morning. It was Abbie Hoover. She was young and it wasn't good that she should be alone with her thoughts this way. He touched his heels to the flanks of his horse and rode down the slope toward the clearing where the cabins stood.

She looked up when she saw him coming and there was a dead look in her eyes and he couldn't tell whether she was glad to see him or not. He had been friendly with young Billy Parcell and because of that the girl had liked him. He said, "You didn't leave town last night then?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. The marshal made Dayton leave us alone."

He found a stirring measure of satisfaction in knowing the nesters were still here. He forced himself to say, "The marshal can make that stick only so long. When it comes to a showdown he takes his orders from Galen Orr. There'll be more trouble if you stay, Abbie."

She looked directly at him then and the dullness was gone from her eyes and there was sharp determination in the tilt of her chin. "They say you have a way with trouble, Al," she said. "Did you ever cure it by running from it?"

He kept thinking of Maxine and of how he had put away his guns for her and

he said, "It's not my place to advise, Abbie. They say Billy killed a Mashed O cow."

A small twist of emotion curled the corner of her lips. "They forced him into it. They cut his fence again and they knew he'd do it. Wouldn't you have done the same, Al?"

He felt the color rising in his cheeks. She was trying to make him answer direct, trying to get him into it. He said, "I have affairs of my own, Abbie."

She looked at him a long time and she wasn't trying to argue. She said, "I'm a woman, Al. I'm young yet, but I'm a woman and I know how women think. I'm proud of what Billy did. I wouldn't want a man of mine to back down from trouble."

He wasn't angry with her. He said, "Maxine is older than you are. She's seen a lot of this. She's lost men of her own."

"Haven't I?"

He had no answer for that.

"Trouble was your business, Al," the girl said softly. "No woman wants to marry trouble. She didn't mean this when she asked you to hang up your guns."

He knew that this young girl, in the nakedness of her grief, was reading every thought in his mind. He knew he did not have to pretend with her nor make apologies. She wasn't accusing him of being a coward. No person could ever do that and he was secure in that knowledge. He said, "Maybe there's more to it than that, Abbie. Maybe trouble is like a disease with a man who's made trouble his business. Maybe if he starts again he likes the feel of it."

She said, "All right, Al." She tried once more. "It's just if they had someone to back them up. Finney and dad and the others— They're not real fighting men, Al. They need someone to back them up." She saw his eyes and she shrugged her shoulders. "All right, Al."

She had come close to the horse. He could see the strain of grief deep in her eyes and he could see more than that. The determination; the pleading. He remembered a time when an old prospector was killed in a senseless fight. That hadn't been Al Santee's affair either, but he had

followed a cold trail for a year and he had killed a man.

He felt his lips tight against his teeth. He said, "You tell them if they run now they're whipped, Abbie. Sometimes it doesn't take guns. Sometimes it only takes a man standing up, saying he's not afraid. If a man bluffs in a poker game he has to be called or he wins." He stopped suddenly and he felt tired. He felt as if he had betrayed a trust and yet he felt good.

She said, "I'll tell dad you said that."

"You asked for advice," he said. "I gave it to you. I can't give you anything more."

She nodded her head understandingly. "That's all right."

He rode back to the ridge and there below him he saw the string of horsemen. He took them to be Mashed O riders because they were coming from that direction and they were quartering across his own land. They often took a short cut like this and sometimes they forgot to close his gate for Galen Orr thought first of his own affairs. But that was all right. A man didn't fight about things like that. Not a man who had made fighting his business too long.

He rode down off the ridge and the horsemen kept coming and he saw that Galen Orr was riding with his men. Al pulled up and waited, leaning forward in his saddle, resting his hands on the horn. He was smoking a cigarette. Galen Orr and his men pulled up friendly like and Orr said, "I don't like it, them nesters being in town. There's talk around they'll try to take Pete out of jail. I won't put up with that kind of nonsense."

"I heard about it," Al said.

"This is cow country," Galen Orr said. "I never did like the idea of nesters moving in here." He was a beefy man with a florid face and greedy little eyes. He liked to run things. He said, "I reckon I can count on you, can't I Al?"

Al Santee said, "They never bothered me, Galen."

Galen Orr half turned in his saddle so that he could look back at the men who rode with him. They were hard faced men and they wore guns. Galen Orr said, "They killed one of my cows, didn't they? Pete caught him and the kid went for a gun. It could have been one of yours."

Al Santee didn't remove the cigarette from his lips. "I wouldn't have cut their fences and let my cows in," he said, looking straight at Orr.

There was more color in Galen Orr's face and he started scratching the back of his hand. He said, "You got a reputation for trouble, Al. It's that kind of talk makes it so."

Dayton had ridden up alongside his boss. Dayton was an ugly man—with a scar that ran from the lobe of his left ear to a point on his chin. It made him look like he was smiling, but he wasn't. He said, "You going to ride with us or not, Santee?"

That was direct. He could take sides or he could keep out of it. He thought of Maxine and of how he had stayed away from trouble for two years. He said, "I better get back and see how my wife is making out."

He turned his horse quickly and rode toward home and he kept telling himself over and over that he was doing the right thing. But there was a tightness inside him and his left hand gripped the reins too hard. There was a vacantness around his middle and he started counting the time since he had worn his guns. He remembered the night Maxine had said, "I want to marry you, Al, because I love you, but I won't marry a man who lives by his guns."

That was the night he had unbuckled the gun belt. That was over two years ago. They were out in the tool shed now, those guns of his, in a drawer. He kept them oiled and he looked at them often when Maxine wasn't around.

AL CAME to the house and he led his horse up to the porch and tied him, but he didn't unsaddle. He went inside and Maxine was sitting by the window, rocking gently back and forth. She had a shawl around her shoulders. She looked as if she didn't feel well, but he thought that maybe he was imagining things. He went to her and kissed her on the forehead. He said, "I saw Abbie. The folks didn't leave town. I reckon Galen Orr and his boys are going to tell them they better had."

She was silent a long time and then she said, "It's just none of our affair, Al."

He went out to the barn and he fixed a pitchfork handle that had been broken for some time. He kept having trouble with his hands. The day was gray and oppressive and there was a weight on his shoulders and against the back of his legs. It kept pressing on him and dragging him down. There was a great silence in the air. He thought of Abbie Hoover and of Billy Parcell and he thought of Galen Orr and of Dayton.

He was fixing a bridle and he drove two rivets and spoiled them and then he threw the bridle into the corner and went into the house. He was breathing heavily and he fought hard to control his voice. He said, "I don't know what gets into a man, Maxine. Sometimes it's just there inside you and it's got to come out. Maybe you think I'm crazy and maybe you'll hate me for it, I don't know. But I just got to be up and doing something. I'm going to town, Maxine. I got to be around people. Maybe I'll even get drunk, I don't know—" He stopped helplessly and the perspiration was running down his cheeks.

She sat there with her head down and her hands clasped in her lap. He knew she was biting her lower lip. She looked up finally and she said, "If you must, Al."

He said, "I don't know what gets into a man—" He turned suddenly and went outside and his horse was there. He vaulted into the saddle and sunk his spurs and rode toward town. The dust rose behind him, but it was lifeless and it settled quickly in the cold air.

He ignored the town as he rode up the main street, but he could not ignore the feel of trouble. It was an old feeling to him. He dismounted and tied his horse and he went into the saloon and now his pulse was beating rapidly and his face was flushed. He saw the doctor there having an evening nip. The doctor said, "Everything all right with Maxine?" He said that but he was thinking of something else.

"She's fine," Al said.

He saw the doctor looking at him closely and he felt guilty about leaving Maxine alone. The doctor said, "I was going out that way and I thought I'd drop by."

"Thanks," Al said. "I wish you'd do that."

He looked down the long bar and a dozen men were watching him. They had

that same look in their eyes that he had seen so many times. They were thinking, *this is the end of it. He couldn't hold out any longer. He's got his guns out there on his saddle. It's none of his business, but he's got his guns.* He saw Galen Orr and Orr raised his glass and said, "Hi, Al. Glad you decided to come along."

Al said, "Hi." He threw a silver dollar on the bar and taking the bottle the bartender shoved toward him he poured himself a drink and drank it fast. Dayton was down there near Galen Orr.

There were a dozen of the town's merchants in the bar beside the Mashed O men. Al knew they hated to see the nesters leave; they were good for business. But no one said anything. Galen Orr moved away from the bar and it was like a signal. His men finished their drinks and they started drifting outside one by one. Dayton was the last man to go.

Dayton said, "That damn little punk killed out of our cows. When I ride for a brand, I fight for that brand. Ain't that what you say, Al? Pete wasn't doin' no more than fightin' for his brand and I'd like to see somebody try to take him out of that jail." He came up to Al and he cocked his head to one side and said, "You comin', Al?"

"Not yet," Al said.

The marshal came in and he stood there blinking at the light like a startled owl. A dozen hard eyes looked at him and the marshal said, "I ain't the judge. I done my duty. Killing a man's cow is rustling and rustling ain't something the law's gonna interfere with too much. But I locked Pete up, didn't I? What the hell more do you want?"

Sam Kelly, the hardware man, said, "Get the hell out of here, Marshal."

The marshal said, "I done the best I could." He turned and went back outside and Al Santee, looking straight ahead, knew that everyone was watching him.

Al kept thinking of Maxine and of how he had made his promise and he kept thinking of how it scared a man thinking of his coming child. He turned from the bar and he stood there looking at the merchants and he rubbed the palms of his hands on the legs of his jeans; rubbed them hard. He said, "I guess I'll get some air."

When he came to the corral he saw that Galen Orr's Mashed O horses were there and then he saw the men squatted down against the fence. Two of them were smoking and one was making marks in the dust with a pointed stick. Dayton took a bottle from his pocket and passed it around. Galen Orr refused the drink. Orr looked up. "Hi, Al. What do you think about it?"

Al Santee said, "I guess all's done that can be done."

Galen Orr said, "The nesters are camped out there by the creek. They aim to make trouble."

"Have they said so?" Al asked.

"I can tell by looking at a man when he aims to make trouble," Galen Orr said.

"It's a handy thing, knowing that."

Dayton laughed a short little laugh. He said, "You ought to know, Al. Have a drink?"

"No," Al said. "I was going down to see Abbie Hoover. I wanted to ask her about staying with my wife awhile after the baby's born."

There was a sharp silence and the man who had been making marks in the dust broke the stick in two with his fingers. It made a loud, snapping sound. Galen Orr said, "Maybe Abbie won't be here."

"I don't think they figure on leaving," Al said. He touched his horse lightly and rode down the road. And without looking back he knew that the Mashed O men had gotten to their feet.

HE RODE by the jail. Someone had smuggled a bottle in to Pete. Pete was singing a slow, mournful cowboy song. He sounded like a man who was singing while lying flat on his back with

his hands under his head. He sounded like a man who was sure of himself. Al rode on by and he saw the wagons down there by the creek. When he was close Finney, Hoover, Stokes and Parcell came out to meet him. Hoover said, "You want something, Al?"

"Just a neighborly call," Al said. "I was by your place today and it looked like you had moved out."

Hoover coughed and Finney scratched the back of his leg with the toe of his boot. Stokes said, "We ain't gun fightin' men, Al."

"Galen Orr says you aim to take Pete out of jail and lynch him," Al said.

"It's a lie," Stokes said flatly. "Orr's looking for excuses."

"I'd tell him that then," Al said. He started rolling a cigarette and as he was running his tongue along the brown paper he looked up and saw Galen Orr and his men coming down the road. The nesters stood there and Al could see their faces in the half light. He felt the old throb of trouble in his ears.

Galen Orr and his men stopped twenty feet away and Orr said, "You taking sides in this thing Al?"

Al Santee lit his cigarette and the flame was bright against his face. He snapped the match away with his thumb and forefinger and it made a whining sound in the air. He said, "Are there sides to take?"

Galen Orr's men had guns. Their coats were open and the guns were there on their hips. Orr said, "We're keeping the law and order, that's all. You make one move toward that jail and somebody's gonna get hurt. We've had enough damn trouble making."

"Nobody's starting toward that jail," Al

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said softly. "If that's all that's in your craw then the trouble's over and these folks can go home."

He had checked the bet to Galen Orr and every man there knew it. If Orr wanted trouble now he would have to have it under its real name. He would have to say that he wanted to run the town his own way. He would have to say that he didn't want the nesters around because with them around he couldn't be the big man he wanted to be.

Al was no longer conscious of the fact that he was not wearing his guns. It seemed enough to be standing there having his say, knowing he was right. He walked forward four steps and he said, "You got anything to say, Dayton?"

Dayton had sobered noticeably. The scar on his cheek started a small twitching and he licked his lips once. His gun was there on his hip, but he kept his hand away from it. He kept looking at Al's bulky coat and it was easy to see he was thinking hard. After a long time Dayton shook his head once. He said, "Galen is the boss here, Al. Not me."

Galen Orr swallowed noisily. They all heard it. He said, "They can't start no trouble—"

"There won't be no trouble," Al said. "Pete's staying in jail. When the time comes we'll pick a jury fair and square. You and me and maybe Hoover here." Al took a deep drag on his cigarette. "That's the way you want it, ain't it Galen?"

Galen Orr was breathing heavily. He looked at the nesters and he looked at Al Santee and he knew he was looking at a trouble man. He made a snorting sound in his nostrils and he said, "You all know damn well that's the way I want it."

As the group passed the jail Al heard Pete yell through the bars. "Hey boss! What's going on, boss?"

He heard Galen Orr's answer. "You go to hell, Pete."

Al turned and Abbie Hoover was standing there and her eyes were bright. Al said, "Abbie, I was wondering if you could come over and stay with Maxine a while after the baby is born."

Hoover said, "Sure she can."

Al mounted his horse.

When he got home the doctor's rig was there in front of the house and the lights

were all burning brightly. He dismounted and he was afraid and his knees were weak. He went inside and left the door open behind him. The doctor's face was white and drawn, but it couldn't have been because of the work he was doing here because he knew his work well and he was a man who was sure of himself. He said, "The baby's here, Al. Maxine was pretty upset, but she's fine now." He put his hand on Al's arm. "She should have a little help around here for a few days."

Al said, "Abbie Hoover's dad said she could come over."

The doctor started breathing rapidly and his eyes were brighter. He said, "It's a fine boy you got, Al. Anything doing in town?"

"It's quiet," Al said.

He went inside and Maxine's face was pale and her hair was dark against the pillow. There was a blanketed bundle beside her and as Al looked at it he tried to speak.

He couldn't tell whether she knew of his part in it or not. She looked up at him and there were tears in her eyes. He felt a slow sinking in the pit of his stomach and he wanted to say he was sorry for failing her and yet he couldn't say that because it wasn't true. A man had to do what he had to do. He saw her lips trembling and then she smiled. "I'm glad Abbie is coming, Al."

Everything was all right then, but it wasn't. There was a long time ahead and once a man made a stand he had to let folks know of it and he could never let them forget it. He brought a chair and he sat there a long time looking at his son and at his wife.

She wasn't crying now and she wasn't smiling either. She had a calm look about her, as if she had grown older and wiser. "We can call him Billy, Al. We can tell folks it's because of Billy Parcell."

He got up then and went to the tool shed. As he walked by the drawer he knew that his guns were in there, well oiled and ready. He didn't look at them. It was enough that they were there. He picked up the bridle he had been working on that morning, drove two rivets and the bridle was mended. Al Santee hung it carefully on a peg and went back to the house.

CHECKIN' FOR STRAYS

By

DAN WALSH



"Blood's lettin' up," he
said hopefully.



Sheriff Gilmore figured the \$500 reward would buy his son a pony and fancy saddle—but that same \$500 was also the price of another lad's neck.

SHERIFF GILMORE'S big right hand automatically rested on the cold butt of his gun as he stepped into the neat living room of the Bristow ranch house. The sharp odor of antiseptic cut strongly into the sickening smell of blood, crinkling his nose in distaste. Then his eyes, fresh from the glare of desert sunlight, became adjusted to the gloom; and he saw little Tommy Bristow stretched on a couch, his shirt ripped away from his left shoulder where a jagged

bloody hole showed in the white flesh.

The young cowboy kneeling beside the couch glanced up quickly as Gilmore entered, then as quickly turned his attention back to the job he was doing. "Give me a hand here, Sheriff," he requested calmly.

Gilmore dropped his battered Stetson on a table as he crossed the room, revealing brown hair turning gray and colorless at the temples. He was a tall man, powerfully built, with a leather-skinned face on which hard years had left their deep tracks. He grunted softly as he knelt to hold a cold wet pad in place over the wound while the cowboy wrung out another from the pan of red-tinged water on the floor.

"I saw the tracks back there aways," Gilmore said slowly. "Saw where the horse had spooked and thrown him. He must have been carrying that .22 rifle in his hands and accidentally shot himself when he hit the ground."

"The way I figure it," the cowboy agreed quietly. "He'd been layin' there quite awhile when I came along."

"I brought the horse and gun on in," the sheriff said, watching the quick sure way the cowboy was tending the wound. He was a blond curly-headed youngster, not much over twenty the sheriff figured, with keen blue eyes that shone very directly from his lean face. His jaw was set a little grimly as he worked, but his long fingers were steady and swift. The sheriff had seen him around town, knew that his name was Smith, but he'd never met the man.

"Bristow here?" Gilmore asked, glancing at the kitchen door.

Smith shook his head without taking his eyes from his work. "Ridin', I reckon. Mrs. Bristow's in the kitchen heatin' water. She's all upset."

"Shore." Gilmore glanced at Tommy's still face, dead white behind its curtain of freckles. He looked to be about ten years old, about the same age as Gilmore's own boy, Frank. "Shore, she's upset," the sheriff repeated. "When you got a kid—"

He stopped talking, but his thoughts ran on. Yeah, when you got a kid, the whole darn world becomes just an apple to pick for him, if you can do it. Especially when his mother's dead. Gilmore set his jaw hard against that thought. His

wife had died only two months before, leaving a pitifully empty house—and an empty bank account.

A sheriffing job in Arizona in the '80's was a twenty-four-hour a day proposition, a hard, thankless way to make a living. All the surrounding states were "cleaning house," which meant that a good many ranchers and cowboys in Gilmore's bailiwick were looking back over their shoulders and stuttering over their names. He often wondered where to draw the line between the bad ones and the reckless ones who had just made one mistake and were trying to forget it.

It was a nerve-wracking job, and it didn't pay much. Not enough to get little Frank the horse and saddle he wanted for his coming birthday. Gilmore thought of the black and white pinto he had just led into the Bristow yard. A good horse, with a jim-dandy hand-carved saddle, a short rawhide reata, a scabbard for the .22. An outfit like that would go a long way toward healing a boy's grief-torn heart. Gilmore could buy such an outfit with five hundred dollars.

He shut his eyes tightly, shaking his head savagely to jar the thoughts out of it. When he looked up, he saw that Smith was regarding him with a narrowed gaze. Their glances locked for a moment, and Gilmore experienced a slight shock as he felt that the cowboy was reading his mind. The sheriff looked quickly back at Tommy.

"Blood's lettin' up," he observed.

"Yeah." Smith said it casually, but Gilmore could feel those blue eyes digging into him, gauging him. Then the cowboy shifted his gaze back to the boy. "As soon as she gets those bandages fixed, we'll tie him up. He'll be all right, I reckon, but he's got to have a doctor."

Again the sheriff shook his head, wondering where the duty of a sheriff stopped and the duty of a man began. He had to keep talking. "You're ridin' for the Bar A, aren't you?"

"Ahuh."

"Thought I saw you in the post office this morning when I got my mail."

"I was there. I stopped in to get the ranch mail."

"Yeah. You pulled out a little before I did. I cut your tracks back here, just be-

fore I saw where you'd stopped to pick up Tommy." The boy stirred restlessly and the sheriff laid a gentle hand on his forehead, thinking again of Frank and that horse he wanted to buy for him.

Mrs. Bristow came in from the kitchen at that moment, carrying a steaming pan in one hand and a strip of white cloth in the other.

"Sheriff, I didn't know you were here," she said in a tight little voice of surprise, "but I'm so glad you came. If Mr. Smith hadn't found Tommy when he did—"

She broke off abruptly, frowning and shaking her head anxiously. She set the pan of water on the floor beside the cowboy, who immediately began preparing the bandages. The bleeding had almost stopped, so Gilmore relinquished his hold on the last pad and slowly stood up.

"Reckon Tom's out on the range, huh?"

"Yes, he is. He won't be back till late tonight, and Tommy's got to have a doctor." A startled look jumped into her eyes. "Were you looking for Tom?"

The sheriff picked his hat off the table, twirling it in his big hands as he watched the white bandage being wrapped firmly around Tommy's wounded shoulder.

"I was just checkin' the range for strays, Mrs. Bristow," he said slowly, "but I reckon every man can look after his own, huh? I'm headin' back for town now. I'll send the doctor right out."

"Thanks, Mr. Gilmore." A little sigh of relief escaped her. Then she smiled warmly. "I was going to ask Mr. Smith to go, but this will be better."

"Shore. Reckon Smith will have to be gettin' back to the Bar A."

The young cowboy paused in the bandaging and turned his head to peer back over his shoulder at the sheriff. His blue eyes were sparkling, and a crooked grin lit his face. "You've saved me a trip, Sheriff," he drawled coolly.

Abruptly the big sheriff stalked outside, swung onto his sweat-streaked horse and rode away without looking back. When he was out of sight of the house, he pulled from his shirt pocket a folded piece of paper which he had received in the mail that morning and had inadvertently opened in the presence of the man who called himself Smith.

Only for a moment did Gilmore glance at the picture of the blond young cowboy who was wanted in Texas, who had thrown away his chance of escape to save a kid's life. For a moment longer he looked at the glaring letters above the picture—\$500 reward. Then with precise care he tore the poster into tiny pieces.

"You're damn right," he told his horse grimly. "That boy of mine don't need a horse right now. And if Texas wants that particular stray, Texas can damn well come and get him!"



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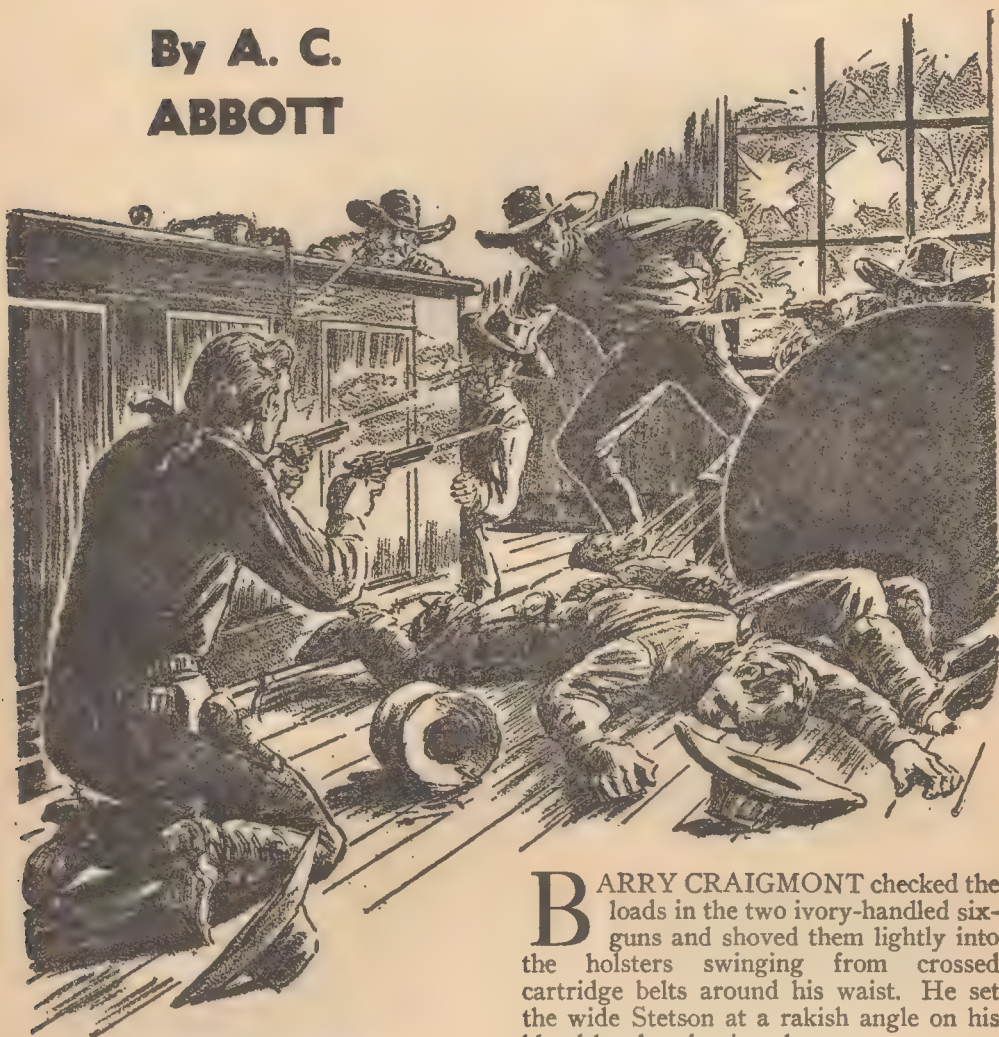
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PREFERABLY DEAD

By A. C.
ABBOTT



Barry kept his guns blazing.

Tomato cans had been actor Barry Craigmont's only target — until he traded lead with Whiskey Jack.

BARRY CRAIGMONT checked the loads in the two ivory-handled six-guns and shoved them lightly into the holsters swinging from crossed cartridge belts around his waist. He set the wide Stetson at a rakish angle on his blond head and grinned.

Mike Mahaney, director of Western Players, shifted his black cigar to the other side of his mouth and gazed apprehensively at his leading actor.

"I'm about to ride a horse to Rocky Bar," Barry said then. "You and the rest of the troupe can take the carriages, but I want to practice some more with these guns. I'll be there in plenty of time for the show tonight."

"No!" Mike walked around in a tight circle twice, like a dog trying to lie down, before he could continue. "No, I tell you! It's twenty miles full of mountains and cutthroats. Whiskey Jack Blaser and his gang are loose around here somewhere and they eat pilgrims like you—"

"Shucks," Barry interrupted with a disarming grin. "They wouldn't take a bite out of me. I'm a plumb bad hombre."

He tilted back on his high-heeled boots to gaze at the poster on the wall advertising their new show. DEAD OR ALIVE, starring Barry Craigmont. To be presented at the Nugget Theater in Rocky Bar, Idaho Territory. So much was routine advertising. The part of the poster designed to catch the interest of the ranchers, miners, and lumberjacks for whom they were playing was in the form of a reward dodger.

WANTED

Slim Maxon—Dead or Alive

\$5000 Reward

The picture on the dodger showed a lean-faced, gray-eyed cowboy who looked entirely capable of taking first bite out of Whiskey Jack Blaser.

"Good picture of me, isn't it?" Barry murmured.

"No!" Mike clamped viciously down on his cigar. "The man in that picture doesn't look like a damn fool!"

Barry laughed. "Look, grandpa," he drawled. "Since I've been learning to ride and shoot, our show has improved a hundred percent, hasn't it? And the box office receipts have skyrocketed. These westerners hate a phoney, even on the stage, and they can spot one a mile away. They like a man who can do what he claims he can do. My acting has become a lot more authentic lately."

"Authentic!" Mike reached despairingly for a handful of hair, temporarily forgetting that hair no longer grew on his bald pate. "You blasted idiot! One of these days you'll get yourself authentically killed. Then what'll I do?"

"Bury me." Barry turned toward the door, dragging his spurs indolently. "In the meantime Slim Maxon is going to pick up twenty miles worth of experience on a horse and use up a couple of boxes of shells on tomato cans and beer bottles."

Mike groaned. "I guess Henry can go on for you tonight."

"He'll look funny," Barry grinned, "going on without this costume I'm wearing. Relax, Mike. I'll be in Rocky Bar in plenty of time for the show."

Without waiting to hear further objections, he strode out of the theater where they had played last night and looked approvingly at the brown horse he had rented from the Dixie Livery Stable. It was a friendly sort of animal, guaranteed to be gentle.

Barry took time to roll a cigarette before mounting, soaking in the warmth of the morning sun. As he struck the match, he became aware of a steady scrutiny from across the street. He glanced up with casual interest, saw a short sandy-haired man sitting a bay horse, staring at him intently. Barry stared back until the man shifted his glance. Then he swung onto the brown horse and turned leisurely up the road to Rocky Bar.

He had not gone a quarter of a mile before a horse cut into the road ahead of him from the fringe of brush. The sandy-haired man on the bay glanced back once before spurring ahead to disappear in a cloud of dust.

"Where," Barry asked his brown horse mildly, "do you reckon that joker is going in such a rush? Wherever it is, he's going to beat me there. That's a cinch."

For a moment he wondered about the stranger's queer actions. Then his eye alighted on a rusty tomato can, and without further ado he whipped out his right hand gun and banged away.

He was incredibly fast with a gun, having spent hours in the dressing room practicing the quick draw. However, until recently he had never fired live ammunition. Now he found to his chagrin that it was one thing to draw and shoot a blank cartridge at a villain who knew he was supposed to fall over, but quite another thing to draw and shoot a real bullet at a tomato can that didn't know it was supposed to jump.

Barry had enjoyed every minute of this western tour, seizing every opportunity to find out more about the western way of life. He was learning the hard way, and there were times when it was very hard indeed.

It was nearly noon when he reached the cluster of unpainted shacks known as Perrine, situated in the pines on the bank of the South Fork River ten miles below Rocky Bar. The main building of the town was a long low frame structure with a wooden walk and awning and two weather beaten signs. The nearer of the two advertised drinks, while the second read *Eats*.

A half dozen horses drowsed at the hitch rack. Barry sat a little straighter in his saddle as he noticed that the nearest horse, sweat-stained, was the bay that had forged ahead of him just outside Dixie. A momentary doubt crossed his mind, but he shrugged it off. The rider had been a stranger to him.

Deciding that a beer would taste good before lunch, Barry dismounted before the saloon, slapped the dust from his clothes, gave his crossed gunbelts a hitch, and trailed his spurs across the porch.

HE PAUSED just inside the door while his eyes became accustomed to the dimness of the interior. Then he made out, all at once, a short bar, a red-faced bartender, and six men whose quiet faces and watchful attitudes contained a subtle menace. One of them was the sandy-haired man he'd seen in Dixie. Another, a towering, raw-boned individual whose hard face was covered by a stubble of black beard, Barry instinctively knew was Whiskey Jack Blaser.

Barry Craigmont felt a distinct shock, not because the men were here but because they were eyeing him much as a buzzard might eye a dying horse. However, he maintained a stony countenance, deliberately returning stare for stare before crossing the small room to lean idly against the bar. He was careful to lean only his left elbow on the bar, keeping his body slightly turned so that the six men were in his range of vision.

The bartender came part way toward him and stopped uncertainly, his little eyes shifting nervously. "What'll it be?"

"Beer," Barry said quietly. He made a slight inclusive gesture. "And whatever the gentlemen would like, if they'd care to drink with a stranger."

A slow hard grin appeared in Blaser's

dark beard. "Whiskey, Joe," he said. Then he turned to Barry. "I don't ordinarily drink with strangers, but you're not exactly unknown in these parts."

Barry, looking back of the bar in the direction indicated by Blaser's jerked thumb, felt himself go cold all over. Tacked up beside the stained cracked mirror was part of the advertisement for his current show. Just part of it. The name of the show and the theater had been cut away. All that remained was the reward dodger of Slim Maxon, dead or alive. And it looked disconcertingly official.

Barry was jolted out of his usual calm. "Where'd you get that thing?" he blurted.

"Pie-eyed cowpuncher brought it in last night," the bartender replied, with marked hesitation. "Said he picked it up in Dixie."

Barry flashed a swift glance at the men in the room and saw, beyond a doubt, that they believed he *was* Slim Maxon, worth five thousand dollars alive or otherwise. He had a crawly feeling that they preferred the otherwise.

"Ye-e-ah." He drawled the word in a hard voice. To himself he said grimly, *Just a joke. Just a plain old practical joke, but what a hell of a sense of humor!*

He drew in a slow deep breath and turned to Blaser, intending to identify himself and put an end to this business. Then he stopped short. Mahaney's words of warning came back to him as swift and hard as a running horse. "They eat pilgrims like you—"

Barry Craigmont kept his thoughts to himself while he studied the dark-lined faces before him. He didn't like the prospect at all. If he identified himself, admitted that he was a greenhorn actor, he'd be putting himself at their mercy—and he'd heard they didn't have any. If he let them continue to think that he was a hardcase named Slim Maxon, they might leave him alone, or they might decide to collect that five thousand dollars. Barry had a sudden vision of his own epitaph—"Killed by mistake."

He looked again at the picture—the steely gray eyes, firm jaw, and unrelenting mouth. Unconsciously, he assumed the pose he had held while the picture was taken.

Your show, Slim, he thought with a trace of humor. *And, damn you, you'd better be good!*

He had never felt comfortable in the role of Slim Maxon. He had felt that his portrayal of the hunted cowboy was shallow, unconvincing; but he knew he would play the part deeply and sincerely this afternoon or else cease playing altogether.

Blaser gulped the whiskey the bartender set in front of him, wiped his lips on the back of his hand. "That's a good picture of you," he commented.

Barry laughed shortly. He had thought so, but now he found that he was inclined to agree with Mike Mahaney. He rang money on the bar and picked up his beer with his left hand. "I'd rather see one that wasn't so damned easy to recognize," he said dryly.

Whiskey Jack laughed unpleasantly. "Are you travelin' or lookin' for a place to light?"

"Traveling," Barry said shortly.

Blaser's eyes narrowed slightly. "Where you wanted? The dodger doesn't say."

"I see it doesn't. Well, I'm wanted in Rocky Bar, bad."

"Ahuh. What you wanted for? 'Dodger doesn't say that either.'"

A slight grin twisted Barry's lips. "I'm awfully handy around stages."

Blaser regarded him thoughtfully for several moments, and Barry could see in his eyes a struggle between quick greed and long-range planning. "We might do business."

"We might." Barry's voice was cold. It was time to run his magnificent bluff. "But I doubt it, very much. I think we'll come nearer getting along if I tend to my business and you tend to yours."

He finished on a hard note of finality. Blaser shifted his feet uncertainly, flashed a questioning glance at his five men, who quickly looked down at their whiskey glasses. The bartender was unpacking bottles, stooping behind the bar, rising to put them on a shelf.

Blaser asked suddenly, "How good are you with those guns?"

Barry laughed outright. "You'd like to know, huh? And can't figure a way to find out easy. Well, nobody's collected that reward—yet!"

"Let's see you draw—just for fun."

"These guns," Barry drawled deliberately, "have a peculiar habit of going off when they're pulled, and they're not particular what they hit." That much, at least, was gospel truth!

"Ahuh." Blaser flipped a gold coin on the bar, seeming to dismiss the subject. "Have a drink on me."

BARRY, concentrating on Whiskey Jack Blaser, had forgotten that the hard working bartender might also be interested in picking up some ready cash. He was congratulating himself on his success with Blaser when a movement behind the bar caught his eye. He glanced that way in time to see the twin muzzles of a double barreled shotgun ease up over the top of the bar. For just an instant Barry stared down those yawning muzzles, then threw himself to the floor.

He heard a deafening explosion and felt the wind of a terrible blast as two loads of buckshot roared over his head. He lit hard on his side, and what little breath he'd had left him at once. But he had no time to worry about a little thing like breathing. He'd caught a glimpse of Blaser and the others reaching for guns, and it seemed to Barry that it was high time the famous Slim Maxon did something!

He rolled and came to his knees, his guns flashing out of the holsters, blazing, bucking against his hands. In the ear-numbing mêlée that followed he realized that he was hitting nothing, but he was laying down a most discouraging barrage that was driving the enemy frantically to cover.

In the language of Slim Maxon, he scattered things considerable. His first bullet made hash out of the south window. His second zinged between the heads of Blaser and the sandy-haired rider, who threw himself sideways, tripping on the bar rail, flinging his arms wildly. Sandy's head struck a brass spittoon with a resounding clang. His violently flung gun struck a companion behind the left ear and both men went to sleep.

Another of Barry's poorly directed shots hit the chain holding the heavy kerosene lamp to the ceiling. The bullet glanced on out the west window while the lamp dropped solidly on the foot of one

of Blaser's men, who promptly let out a howl and swung into an Apache war dance.

Blaser was behind an overturned table while two of his men had ducked behind the end of the bar. Barry felt the breath of lead on his cheeks, felt bullets tugging at his shirt; but he kept his guns blazing even after his targets were all out of sight.

Then he remembered the shotgun. He rose to his feet and turned one gun toward the bar, where the man was frantically trying to reload; and in the ensuing few seconds the bartender was the only thing in sight that didn't stop a bullet. The roar of sixguns was almost drowned in the crash of splintering glass as the mirror collapsed and corked bottles exploded. Barry had just a glimpse of a gallon jug toppling off a high shelf, landing squarely on the barkeep's head.

Then Barry's left hand gun ceased jumping at the pull of the trigger and he realized it was empty. He abruptly decided that even Slim Maxon wouldn't be expected to stick around under those circumstances, so he whirled to a door in the back corner of the room. He slammed his last shot in a general westerly direction and went through the door with a lunge.

At first glance he thought the room was empty. He flung the door shut and was preparing to sigh with relief when the hard prod of a gun in his back made him gasp instead.

"Don't move!" The voice was distinctly feminine and also distinctly chilly. "Drop those guns!"

Barry twisted his head, carefully, but far enough to see a lovely flushed face framed by golden hair. The girl's violet eyes were blazing with determination.

Barry grinned. "Mind if I reload them first?" he asked politely. "They're no good empty."

The girl gasped at his impertinence. "My father?" she demanded. "Did you kill him? The bartender?"

"Shucks, no!" Barry chuckled, failing to add that he might have if he could have shot straight enough. "He's not hurt. My main quarrel seems to be with Whiskey Jack Blaser and his playmates."

The tension went rapidly out of the girl and the gun she held lowered. Without waiting for permission, Barry started

shoving fresh cartridges into his guns.

"Who are you?" the girl asked with restrained interest.

"Somebody else," Barry said bluntly.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I don't think anything about it. I know I'm going to Rocky Bar. I'll let you know later just how I managed it."

"What have you done?" she questioned. "Why are they after you?"

Barry finished loading the guns, listened intently at the door for a moment, then shoved them lightly into holsters. He turned to face the girl, an unquenchable good humor sparkling in his eyes.

"I've been framed," he told her soberly. "I'm a good guy who's been misunderstood and persecuted. You stick around till the third act and you'll see." He ignored the dazed expression that slipped over the girl's face. "In the third act I clear my name and live happily ever after. I'm—"

"You're drunk," she interrupted with a giggle, "but you're nice. And if you're an enemy of Whiskey Jack Blaser's, you're a friend of mine—as long as you don't hurt my dad. You'd better go out the back door. There's a horse down the other side of the restaurant."

SHE led him through small but neatly kept living quarters and let him out into a tin can littered back yard. He heard the murmur of the river just over the bank and saw the road stretching, dusty and inviting, up the stream toward Rocky Bar.

Barry turned to tip his hat to the girl. "Thank you, ma'am," he said evenly. "I'll be coming back through here tomorrow sometime—I hope! If you can corral your dad for a minute, maybe we can get better acquainted."

He left her then and sprinted along the back of the building to the far end. The odor of coffee floated out of the restaurant and reminded him that it was a long ten miles till lunch time, but he was thankful that he still had a stomach to put a lunch into. The horse, a long-legged sorrel, stood with reins dragging.

"I hope you can run, brother," Barry grunted as he scooped up the reins and swung aboard. He heard a yell from the restaurant and remembered suddenly what

fate was meted out to horse thieves in this neck of the woods. But it was too late to change his mind now.

The animal couldn't buck, which was undoubtedly a good thing, but he certainly tried hard. With long crow-hopping jumps he carried Barry out past the end of the building into full view of the three men who were just swinging into saddles. Barry had only a glimpse of Blaser's bearded face, but there was no mistaking the meaning of the yell that went up.

Slim Maxon might have been a two-gun cowboy who could ride a bucking horse, shoot outlaws, and drink coffee all at the same time; but Barry Craigmont definitely was not. He had to let go of something in order to grab a gun.

He released his grip on the saddle horn long enough to whip a gun from its holster, but the next jump of the horse nearly threw him. He grabbed again for the horn, slamming his wrist against it so hard that the gun went spinning from his hand. That hurt, and Barry began to lose his patience.

Bullets were zipping all around him. Whiskey Jack Blaser was charging up the road, his gun blazing, his dark face distorted. One of his bullets tore Barry's hat from his head, and Barry's temper went sailing off with it.

At that instant the sorrel caught a grazing bullet across his rump which caused him to jump wildly, head up. He started to stampede, but Barry, with a savage yell, hauled him around and sent him hurtling straight at Blaser. Whiskey Jack drew up hard on his plunging horse, tried to turn him, but he hadn't enough time. He was in the act of turning when the sorrel hit him broadside.

The crash was terrific. Barry heard a muffled curse from Blaser, felt himself leave the saddle as if he'd been catapulted. Then he was in the road, struggling up through a choking cloud of dust, trying to see what was happening.

The two men who had started to follow

Blaser up the road had pulled up uncertainly. Barry, feeling the surge of violent anger, lifted his gun menacingly, which was all they needed. With wild jerks on the reins, they wheeled about and spurred out of town, heading back toward Dixie.

Barry swung back toward the wreck he had caused in time to see the two horses struggling to their feet, apparently unhurt. Whiskey Jack Blaser lay where he had fallen, his plans to collect Slim Maxon and five thousand dollars indefinitely postponed.

A tall, rough-garbed rancher caught the reins of the sorrel and grinned crookedly at Barry. "I reckon you didn't really intend to steal my horse?"

Barry expelled a deep breath and, with it, his anger. He grinned ruefully. "Thanks, no. I had thought to borrow him, but I believe I'll take my own if it's all right with you."

"Anything you do's all right with me," the rancher said levelly. "We've been wanting somebody to pull Blaser's fangs. Now we'll just hogtie him and keep him for the sheriff." The man cuffed his hat over his right ear, scratched his head, and grinned widely. "I saw your show last night. I though you was just actin', but I guess maybe you wasn't."

The rattle of wheels and harness pulled Barry around to face a wide-eyed Mike Mahaney, who practically fell out of the stage door in his haste and excitement. He took one look at the prostrate Blaser, another at Barry's dusty clothes and bullet ripped shirt.

"What the hell," he demanded, "have you been doing?"

Barry reached for tobacco, while a satisfied grin slid across his dusty face. "Just practicing," he drawled. "But, d'you know, Mike, Slim Maxon's going to be a more convincing character from here on. He just found out how it feels to be worth five thousand dollars—preferably dead!"

The range hog likes a rattlesnake diet, devours the snake leisurely, rattle end first. The hog ignores the rattlesnake's deadly sting. For that "ham-on-legs" has so much fat between his hide and his bloodstream that the venom is buried in it, does no damage.

—J. W. Q.



YUKON'S PHANTOM CACHE

By **MICHAEL
OBLINGER**

CHAPTER

1

Malloy's Poke

Yukon trudged down the west side of Rocky Ridge toward Lew Bettelman's camp. Thick as snow, a heavy spring frost had temporarily rid the land of millions of lusty blood-letting pests and had put a new tang in the air. Yukon's young



**Yukon and Lew Bettelman searched for the dead Malloy's
fabulous mine — but they didn't reckon rightly with their
body-snatching partner.**



**Bettelman leaped and got
Tiny's gun.**



***Stirring
Alaskan
Novelette***

bewiskered face glistened with particles of wet as the warm sun hit it broadside.

He stopped short. "Yah, I'm pretty sure it's him all right."

He was descending in such a manner that his slow down course would be unseen from below. Neither caution or fear had any part of it, it was just the natural sourdough instinct to keep one's business a strictly private concern.

Anyway, it would be fun to surprise Bettelman whom he hadn't broken bannock with for two long years, chiefly for the reason that Lew, crossing over on the Canadian side, had got himself in trouble sassing a mountie. Lew had remained at Dawson, living quietly as a guest of the Dominion government, while Yukon had wandered around Alaska like a lost soul. A few days ago Yukon had learned that his former partner had been released from jail and was heading back for their old stamping grounds on the upper Koyukuk. Suddenly once more all the excitement about Malloy's poke and his and Lew's efforts to trail the lobsticks to where Malloy had his gold, burned up again.

Yukon slid down to the valley floor, and grinned. Lew's camp was smoky from a damp wood fire smouldering in front of a yellow, weathered kick-tent, and Lew himself was squatted on his heels slicing bacon into a pan.

Yukon walked up behind Bettelman and cleared his throat. "Why don't you blow on it?" he suggested mildly.

Bettelman went on slicing the bacon as if he hadn't heard. Though he had jumped slightly at the sound of Yukon's voice, he wouldn't break the long-standing custom in Alaska of hiding one's inner emotions under a thick unresponsive coat.

Presently he said, "I figured they'd drowned you in the Koyukuk long 'fore this, Yukon. How come they didn't?"

"'Cause I can swim."

The pleasantries over, Bettelman rose and pumped Yukon's arm. "You got a foot loose?" he asked eagerly.

"Yah."

"What you been at?"

There was a long list of things Yukon had been at in the two years since they had separated, but whose business was that? He parried the question with one of his own:

"How was the grub over at Dawson, Lew?"

"Fine."

"What was the charge on you besides sassing that Mountie?"

"I slapped him," Bettelman said.

"Drunk?"

"No, he was sober."

"I mean you, you dang fool."

Bettelman avoided Yukon's direct gaze and slightly hung his head. Then he put the pan on the fire and peered into the tea pail hopefully. While his friend was thus engaged, Yukon removed his tarp-covered blanket-roll and shoulder-pack, opened and dug into the pack and brought forth a small object wrapped in tinfoil.

"Have a seegar," he said.

Bettelman snatched it out of Yukon's fingers and stuck it in his own pocket. The tea water began to burble. In the frying pan the bacon strips curled and had to be straightened out.

Yukon said, "I tracked straight here soon as I got word you had crossed the line. Nobody ever found that poke yet, Lew, or even heard about the lobsticks, but everybody figures you and me will make another try."

Bettelman nodded. "It was all I thought about in jail," he said.

"Figure anything new?"

"I did." Bettelman stirred the bacon vigorously. "We got off Malloy's trail after we left that last lobstick on Shoulder Hill. To there the lobstick trail was clear enough. The limbs pointed the way to go and always brought us to the next lobstick. But the last tree on Shoulder Hill, which pointed northeast, took us forty miles without a blaze or sign or another lobstick anywhere."

Bettelman paused, threw some tea into the tea pail and removed the pail from the fire.

"In jail I played me a game," he said. "I pretended I was Malloy. Why would I make that last lobstick a liar an' all the rest true?" He stared hard at Yukon. "You try to answer that."

Yukon did. "To throw anybody off who might get the notion to follow me."

BETTLEMEN chuckled. "That's right. The tree on Shoulder Hill is a liar, but it also speaks true to the one who

lobbed the branches. The branches purposely point the wrong way. Malloy was tricky. But in his boots who wouldn't be? He had found himself a fortune."

While they were eating breakfast, Yukon pondered over Bettelman's theory and it made good sense to him. The last lobsterstick they had found on Malloy's trail two years ago must have been cleverly trimmed by a cunning old man to confuse anyone who might attempt to follow him. It pointed northeast. On the lower trunk were two small blazes none of the other trees had. Malloy might have marked it that way so as not to confuse himself. Seeing those small blazes, he would know instantly that this was a liar tree and be guided accordingly.

Bettelman lit his pipe. "From Shoulder Hill we'll start southwest this time, Yukon. But there's one thing I got to tell you first. We'll have company."

Gulping down the last mouthful of tea, Yukon nearly choked. "You mean you've rung in someone else?" he demanded coldly as soon as he could talk. "You mean it isn't going to be a two-way split? Here I've waited two years for you to get outa jail so we could put in together. Then you make other plans without so much as consulting me. Is that fair?"

Long months of sedentary living had bleached Lew's cheeks so white that when he flushed, as he did now, it was like fire burning in a snowbank.

"I was tricked into it," he confessed. "It was a case either of cutting him in or going back to jail again. This time in Alaska. Not just me this time but you, too."

The startling statement whipped Yukon to his feet. "Both of us!" he snarled. "Jail! You crazy, man, or just plain chased? Anyhow, what would be the charge?"

"Malloy's murder."

Yukon rolled his eyes and stepped back as if someone had hit him. His young-old face contorted into an expression so horrible that it even frightened Bettelman.

"Murder Malloy!" Yukon shouted. "Us—his best friends—the fellers that nursed him in his last sickness, reported his death to the commissioner at Fairbanks after we had walked through fifty below and the worst storm in history?"

Yukon paused to clank his jaws and refill his lungs with air. "It was us that chipped out the frozen ground to bury him and raised that nice marker for his grave."

"That's true," Bettelman said. "But the trouble is everyone knows that Malloy struck it rich."

"Well?"

"An' that he died at our cabin."

"I don't get you."

Bettelman waved his arms. "Stop talking till I get a chance to explain it then. Malloy's body was dug up less than a month ago on suspicion there mighta been foul play. It was Jake Ronda did it. We told the commissioner Malloy had died from pneumonia, which was true, but we was afraid to tell him about the bear, how Malloy was knocked down and mauled so bad he could barely make it to our cabin. Weakness and exposure brought on the pneumonia."

"That was all we told the commissioner an' he took our word for it. But not Ronda. Him and some of the boys figured we had murdered Malloy in order to get his claim. They figured that soon as I'd served my time in Dawson you an' me would go straight to Malloy's poke an' cash in big. Ronda thinks he's found the evidence to convict us. Week ago, the day I was let out of jail, he met me in Dawson and told me what he'd done. Now we've got the choice of splitting with Jake or he'll fetch the police and show them how one side of Malloy's face was crushed in."

It was a long speech for Bettelman. Yukon had followed his every word intently, changing expression from amazement to anger and back again.

"That crooked sharpie!" he exploded.

"Our mistake was not telling the commissioner the straight about the bear in the first place," Bettelman said.

Yukon blinked his eyes and spat. "What did Ronda do with the old man after he dug him up?"

"Put him back in the grave, he told me."

"How much Malloy's gold Ronda want?"

"Half."

Yukon squatted down, lit his pipe with a burning twig and cussed softly. Gone now all the excitement of hunting for

Malloy's claim, which in derision folks had nicknamed Malloy's poke, for the reason that each fall when the sly old man had come down to Fairbanks to spend the winter, he always carried a bulging leather poke full of the yellow stuff that had helped to make Alaska famous.

A great difference of opinion had existed as to where Malloy had staked his claim. However, everybody agreed it was located somewhere in Brooks Range between the north branch of the Porcupine and the upper source of Koyukuk River. A few intrepid sourdoughs had tried to follow Malloy to his secret mountain fastness without success. Several others, including Jake Ronda, had offered him bribes. But not until a few hours before his death had Malloy given a single clue that would have helped anyone to follow his trail into the rugged, trackless country to the place where he had struck it rich.

Now Yukon recalled that occasion, wishing he had never had a part in it.

"Hot water spring," the old man had muttered feebly. "Lobsticks. Follow the—"

His lips only moved after that and nothing had come out. Yet Yukon and his partner had a clue. Lobsticks! But where did these lobsticks start? Unless a man knew where Malloy went after leaving Wiseman, near which Yukon and Bettelman had thrown up their prospector's shack, it was like looking in a haystack. However, by good luck mostly, they found the first lobstick just below a rapids on Kiyak Creek. From there they had gone on to Shoulder Hill to the last lobstick in a hard-to-find, confusing string of four, and had been balked by what Bettelman had called the liar tree. Caught in blizzards and deep snow, they had been forced to return to Wiseman, from where, a few weeks later, Bettelman had mushed some mail to Dawson. There he had gone on a bender and run afoul of the law.

Yukon straightened out of his squat. "I got an idea how we can fix Jake Ronda," he said, "so that if he squeals to the commissioner it won't do him one bit of good."

"How?"

"We'll dig up Malloy's corpse, take it

up to the head of Twin Smokes Glacier an' drop it through a crack in the ice." Yukon paused to smile at his own ingenuity. "No living soul can see to the bottom of one of them fissures, Lew. A million years from now, when they do find his body, chances are we won't be around."

Bettelman nodded gravely. "But how will we explain to the commissioner when Jake reports to him that Malloy's gone? What then? He'll accuse us of hiding the evidence."

Yukon didn't falter. Once inspired, he was a hard man to down. "That's simple," he said. "We'll have Jake arrested for illegally opening a grave and then accuse him of making off with the evidence himself and hoping to incriminate us."

A pair of twinkles worked into Bettelman's gray eyes. He brought out Yukon's gift, carefully removed the wrapping, and stuck the cigar between his teeth at a jaunty angle.

"I shoulda hired you for my lawyer over in Dawson," he said.

While the partners were breaking camp in preparation for the trip home, Bettelman said, "I agreed we would meet Ronda at Chandalar next Thursday an' give him our answer. That's just four days from now."

"We won't meet him," Yukon declared cheerfully. "We'll be on the trail to Twin Smokes with poor Malloy."

CHAPTER

2

Unwanted Visitors

The partners arrived at their old stamping grounds on the following day. The one-room shack, built by their own hands, stood snug to a hill for breakwind shelter, its windows boarded up, weeds growing thick and tall on the sod roof. To the right of the cabin in a level open spot stood a heaped-up mound of stones that supported a large ax-hewn cross more than six feet tall. Crudely painted on the crossarm were the words, *Hank Malloy*, and the simple inscription, *Rest In Peace*.

Glancing toward that marker, Yukon reverently took off his hat. Then he started in amazement.

From the rusty chimnev sticking up

through the cabin's roof ascended a thin, blue column of smoke.

"Lookit!" he gasped. "Someone's inside there."

A creaky door opened and three men stepped out. Instantly Yukon recognized every one of them: Jake Ronda, tall, thin, with a red scraggly beard; Lon Fallon, shaped roundly and sleek like seal, and broad, towering Tiny McKeen. With the possible exception of McKeen, not one of the party had ever turned his hand at honest labor. They were gamblers, booze-runner and poachers. Though often suspected by wildlife agents and the territorial police, they had never been caught.

Ronda waved, grinned, and came down the path toward the partners, his friends trailing behind him. Yukon hesitated, then soberly shook hands with all of them.

"Odd to find you gents here," he said, addressing Ronda. "Lew told me you'd planned to stop at Chandalar and would wait for us there."

Ronda chuckled. "So I did. I was headed for Chandalar now."

Bettleman flushed hotly. "Our business is only with you," he said pointedly, then turned and scowled at Fallon and McKeen.

Ronda's thin face took on an expression of great innocence and candor. "Lon and Tiny and I had another deal on," he explained. "That's why they're with me. We planned to buy out an old mining syndicate."

"You don't say!"

Ronda chuckled again. "Now that we've met, no sense for me to go on to Chandalar to wait for you there."

"We've got things to attend to here at the shack," Yukon said. "Take several days. You'd best go on to Chandalar, Jake."

"Why?"

Yukon sweated inwardly and kept glancing at his partner. How could they possibly take Malloy up to Twin Smokes Glacier if Jake stuck around? He wracked his brains in a desperate effort to find some valid reason to offer Ronda why he must go to Chandalar at once. Abruptly, it came to him. With an air of great secrecy Yukon took Jake's arm and led him out of hearing of the others.

"Just between you an' me an' Lew,"

he said in low confidential tones, "Malloy's mine is a sink-shaft in solid rock that fills up with water. 'Fore we can get down to where the vein is, the shaft's got to be pumped or siphoned out."

"Well, how did Malloy manage?"

"He had a pump," Yukon answered, drawing widely upon his imagination. "Last time there he busted it. That's why he didn't come back with any gold the fall he died."

The pupils of Ronda's eyes were hot, sharp points. Yukon had never seen a greedier mouth or a face so tormented with yearning.

"What you suggest then?" Ronda asked.

"Lew and I are pinched for dough, Jake. About all we can manage is our share of the grubstake, hardly that. I figured that if you'd run along to Chandalar like a good feller an' buy that pump, we wouldn't be delayed. Thursday we'll meet you at the trading store, as Lew agreed we would. Then we'll start."

"From what you've just said, am I to understand that you and Lew have accepted my offer?"

Yukon nodded. "What other alternative we got?"

"Half interest in Malloy's mine is all I'm asking," Ronda said. "That's letting you off easy. If you take me up, your secret will be safe with me."

Yukon didn't answer. He was raging like a forest fire. What he ought to do was crack that crook on the jaw. He said crossly, "Okay, what about the pump?"

"I'll go to Chandalar right off," Ronda promised. "You can trust me. I'll take care of everything."

Yukon and Bettleman spent the remainder of the morning unboarding the windows and cleaning up the shack. Both were in high spirits. After a light lunch of ptarmigan stew, griddle cakes, coffee and dried blueberry pie, Yukon announced that he had never before felt so powerful loaded with energy and so full of firm intentions as he did right then.

"You got to be up on your toes when you deal with crooks like Ronda," he said. "Imagine that skunk busting into our business, Lew, and threatening us with the law. Him that has broke all the laws that ever was put on the books."

"Naturally he's a stinker," Lew agreed, "or he wouldn't believe we murdered Malloy."

WHILE Lew was washing the dishes Yukon hunted up digging tools—pickaxe, shovels and iron bar, and let down a toboggan he and Bettelman had strung up to the center ridgepole to protect it from the weather. After talking things over, he and his partner had decided to use a land-sled to transport their precious cargo twenty miles northward to Twin Smokes Glacier. No easy job tugging that toboggan up steep mountain slopes but it had to be done if they wanted to be free of Ronda.

Yukon had all his equipment laid out in a neat pile and was waiting for Bettelman to come to give him a hand, when steps sounded on the stoop outside and the door opened.

Across the room Yukon heard a startled squeak. A handful of tin plates Lew was putting in the cupboard clattered to the floor. Fearing Ronda might have returned, Yukon twisted sharply around for a look at their visitor. He slitted his eyes and stared.

He didn't even know the guy. However, he recognized the uniform, neat service khaki, tall boots and wide-brimmed hat. Clean-shaved, hard-visaged, the newcomer stood just inside the room.

"Hello, Bettelman," he said. "So this is where you hole-in, eh?"

"That's right, Sarge," Bettelman answered in a strangled voice. "Yah, this is our dump."

Yukon had a horrible premonition. The man standing there was a Canadian mountie and, as Lew seemed to know him pretty well, it must be the one he had sassed. Had Lew got into some other mess after being freed from jail? Had the dang fool got drunk again and assaulted the mayor or tried to burn down the town? Sober, Bettelman usually avoided trouble, but in his cups he was as mean and unpredictable as a skunk-bear.

Yukon took one look at Lew's tightening lips, then walked over to plead with the mountie.

"Lew ain't a bad sort," he said. "Him and me's been pardners for years. I'll

vouch for him and see he doesn't get into any more trouble, Sarge, if you'll overlook what he's done this time."

"All I did was hoist a few at the North Star," Bettelman confessed sheepishly. "You wouldn't call that a crime."

"Anyway, this is Alaska," Yukon said. "If you're going to take him, Sarge, you'll need extradition papers. We know our rights."

The mountie took off his hat and scratched his head. Suddenly, he grinned. "Rest easy," he said. "Bettelman's served his term. I've come here by appointment to confer with several of your Alaskan officials."

Yukon relaxed. "Fine!" he said "Lew, fix him a pot of tea." He turned to their visitor. "That sounds like some border incident, if you ask me."

"I'm not asking you," the mountie said coldly.

A few minutes later Ed Hart, the wild-life agent walked in, followed by Commissioner Ranson himself. At sight of Ranson, Yukon twisted his fingers in knots. Sweat rolled off his chin. Ranson would be sure to bring up the subject of Malloy again and, of course, he would want to look at the grave.

Supposing, Yukon thought, that the suspicion that Malloy had been murdered had not been harbored by Ronda alone? Supposing Ranson had heard vague rumors and had come to the conclusion that maybe he ought to open investigation proceedings at once.

In the next half hour Yukon was tormented by thoughts that took him on a merciless flight through courtroom, jail and on to the gallows, where he could see himself wearing a black hood over his head and a noose around his neck. Who would believe that story about the bear? Surely he and his partner were sunk if Ranson ever got it into his head to open the grave.

Commissioner Ranson, a genial, well-set-up man in his late forties, greeted the mountie, shook hands with the partners, then passed out the cigars.

Everyone sat down. Ranson beamed at Yukon and Bettelman and offered his apologies. "I know you boys wouldn't mind our meeting here," he said. "Your cabin is the only one on this part of the

river and when I wrote to Sergeant Davis I traced the route for him roughly on a map and put in the location of this cabin."

"You're welcome as the flowers in spring," Bettleman said.

The commissioner nodded. "Well spoken. I knew I could depend on you. Now if you'll excuse us, there's a little matter Sergeant Davis came to see us about."

The partners took the hint and went outside. Yukon wiped the sweat off his face and gulped in lungful of air.

"**A**LL hell must be popping," he said. "Look, Lew, when the Dominion of Canada and the United States government come to hold a secret conference in this here wilderness, it's something more than just a token of international good will."

"Seems like it."

"But how are you going to take Malloy up to the glacier?" Yukon wondered.

"We'll have to wait till they go."

"Look!" Yukon exclaimed, pointing.

Ranson had brought his own pack-train. Four ponies were hobbled out not far from the cabin and there was a large pile of stuff covered with a tarp. Curious, Yukon and Bettleman walked over and peeped under the tarp. Flour, sugar, bacon, two large hams and an assortment of canned goods. Enough grub there to last a dozen men for a month.

"We're not going to starve," Bettleman said, drooling over a can of peaches.

"We're not going to move Malloy either," Yukon declared with a catch in his voice. "Or find his poke. If we have to stay here till after Thursday, we'll also have Jake Ronda on our necks. You can guess what'll happen then."

Commissioner Ranson came outside, puffing on a cigar, and booming his apologies for keeping them waiting. "Boys," he said, "I'd like to ask you another small favor. Sergeant Davis, Ed Hart and I would like to make our headquarters here for a time. Something has developed that requires our attention. It's exceedingly important."

"You're welcome," Yukon said, setting his jaws.

The commissioner beamed. "I knew you'd cooperate. Thank you." He looked

off to the right and the six-foot-high marker at the head of Malloy's grave loomed up in his sight. "Ah, Hank Malloy! I'd almost forgotten he died here. Queer duffer. They say he had a gold mine somewhere."

"But no one knows where it is," Yukon put in hastily. "No one ever found it."

"Nice grave," Ranson said. "Yes, sir. That's a very fine marker."

He headed toward the marker and Lew and Yukon followed along. Ten or fifteen feet from the grave the partners started back in horror. The mound of stones supporting the marker had completely concealed the gaping hole behind—six feet deep of empty nothingness.

"Holy hell, Malloy's gone!" Yukon yelled.

"Incredible!" Ranson said. "Now why—"

He approached the grave, picked up a handful of loose dirt and examined it carefully. "This has just been recently turned, boys." He pointed. "You can see for yourselves it hasn't even settled."

Prickles swarmed over Yukon like mosquitos. He avoided Ranson's eyes.

"I don't understand this," the commissioner said, glancing sharply at each of the partners in turn. "How could this happen under your noses?"

"We haven't been here for more than two years," Bettleman tried to explain. "Just opened up the shack this morning, Mr. Ranson."

"Where've you been?"

Lew choked and flushed guiltily. "Jail."

"Jail!"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you been in jail too, Yukon?"

"No, sir."

"Where were you?"

"Everywhere," Yukon answered evasively. "I've been sort of roaming like."

Ranson shook his head. "I don't like this," he said.

"We don't like it either," Yukon confessed. "But I can assure you we're innocent. Besides, why would we want to dig up a body we'd buried ourselves?"

"I can't imagine," Ranson said grimly, "but I'm going to find out."

They returned and entered the cabin. Sergeant Davis and Ed Hart were sitting

at a table pouring over a map. Ranson strode past them and went over and hung up his coat. As he turned, something at the back of the cabin struck his attention. It was Yukon's recently assembled pile of digging tools, toboggan, rope and tarp.

"Ah!" he said, and beckoned to the partners. "What's all that?"

Yukon's tongue was frozen in his mouth. He'd forgotten those telltale tools, the rope, that toboggan! Looked like he and Lew had done the job out there at the grave all right, it sure as hell did.

"We keep our stuff stacked around like that," he mumbled foolishly.

Ranson no longer was genial. A frown settled between his eyes. He stroked his chin. "Malloy had a rich claim," he said, as if thinking aloud. "Two years ago, he came to this cabin, sick, and subsequently died. You buried him. There's the grave and the marker."

"We put a lot of work on that marker," Yukon said.

Ranson ignored him. "The body's gone and now these tools—" He paused and stared hard at them. "Your tools. Yet you claim you don't know a thing about it."

"Yes, sir."

"You don't happen to know where his claim is either, I don't suppose?" Ranson asked gruffly.

"No, sir."

"Something very ominous about this whole business," Ranson declared.

Bettleman started to speak, but Yukon stopped him with a look. The less they said, the better. An unguarded word might ruin them.

"I must find the body," the commissioner said, speaking to himself.

"We'll help you," Yukon offered.

"Look, Mr. Ranson, I just remembered. This morning when Lew and I got here there were signs someone else had spent the night right here in this shack. The stove was still warm. Naturally we thought it was some Tena heading north. But it could have been someone else."

"Who?"

Yukon flushed. "It could have been the one that took Malloy," he answered.

"Why would anyone take Malloy? What could he gain?"

"What could Lew and I gain either?" Yukon countered. "Does that make sense?"

"It might if you had murdered him."

Bettleman turned white. Yukon started to gnaw his fingers, then with a mighty effort controlled himself. "There was no murder committed. But someone stole the body and we'll help you find it, Commissioner, if you'll give us a chance."

Ranson had never looked grimmer, Yukon thought, as he nodded his assent. "All right. Report back to me in two weeks, otherwise—"

Yukon knew what he meant. If they failed to report, the commissioner would send the police out after them.

CHAPTER

3

Body-Snatcher

Darkness was closing in on the following day when the partners saw settlement lights blinking against the deep cutbanks along the river at Chandalar. They had poled an old raft downstream, making good time. En route, Yukon had outlined a plan which, he said, couldn't get them in any worse mess than they already were, and might even lead to something.

"You and I know Jake Ronda has hid the body," he said. "He was smarter than we thought. Figured ahead we might conceal Malloy ourselves and leave him without a threat to hang over our heads or a chance at Malloy's gold."

"Well, he still has the threat so what better off are we?"

"We'll have to find out what he's done with Malloy."

"How?"

"Maybe scare him into telling."

"That won't work."

"If it doesn't, we'll try something else."

Yukon knew where to look for Ronda and they found him there, sitting at a small table in a smoky back room, a huge stack of chips in front of him. Three other players sat at the table too, and from the expressions on their faces, weren't doing so well. All of them seemed relieved when Yukon stepped up behind Ronda's chair, nudged his arm and said:

"Sorry, Jake, to tear you away like this. But it's something important."

Ronda hastily cashed in his chips and followed the partners through another smoky room, where a few rugged characters were drinking and talking in front of a small bar. Yukon had a little trouble guiding Bettleman through to the street, but he did, and outside in the starlight growled in his ear, "Just keep ahold of yourself."

He turned to Ronda. "Take us to where you're staying. We've got a lot to talk about. Something's happened that's going to spoil everything unless we move fast."

Yukon refused to say more until they were seated in Ronda's small room at Joe Keep's stopping place. It was furnished with two chairs, dresser and cot. A kerosene lamp, which Ronda had lit, shed a little light around them.

Ronda looked worried. "You mentioned some trouble. For Pete's sake, speak up!"

Yukon let him have it. "You figured you were dang smart taking Malloy so we couldn't hide the evidence. You wanted to protect yourself. Instead you balled things so bad neither you or us'll ever get any of Malloy's gold. Not a smell. Maybe you meant to be smart, but you sure pulled a boner."

"What boner?"

"Why did you leave that grave open, you damn fool?" Yukon snarled. "Look here, right after you left, the police came along and there it was, a big, gaping hole an' nothing in it. Now Lew and I are under orders to appear at Fairbanks for questioning. We can't go to Malloy's mine till afterwards, if ever. Nice sweet deal you pulled on yourself."

"You're lying!" Ronda gasped.

"Okay," Yukon said, "take a run over to our cabin and check on me. Ed Hart and Ranson and a Canadian mountie all making it their headquarters."

Ronda leaped from his chair, startled. Fear rolled his eyes, hollowed his cheeks. He started toward the door, hesitated, came back toward Yukon and his hands were shaking.

"You—you wouldn't give a man a wrong tip?" he asked in an unsteady voice. "You wouldn't lie, would you?"

"No," Yukon said, abruptly getting the

drift of things. "I wouldn't lie. Jake, they got you in a corner. You're through."

Ronda stood stockstill, beads of sweat forming on his thin hawk-nose. Obviously he was trying to pull himself together. Muscles around his mouth jerked.

"You boys wait here. I'll be right back," he snapped.

He darted out, ran down the hall and knocked sharply at a door. The partners heard low voices, sounds of returning steps. Lon Fallon and Tiny McKeen followed Ronda in. McKeen had a gun in his hand. Ronda grabbed his hat and jammed it on his head.

"We're all going back near your cabin," he said. "Fast. I got cayuses in the barn. We'll ride all night over the pack-trail going up to the Koyukuk."

"Not us," Yukon objected. "We've just arrived."

McKeen pointed the gun at him. "You heard what Jake said. Start!"

A few minutes later they rode out of town, hearing coyotes yipping and the river droning behind them along its winding, ice-cut channel. Stars dimly lit the narrow pack-trail over wooded hills, through creepy hollows and across wide plateau lands. Hour after hour the only sounds were creaky saddles, the steady clack of hoofs. Yukon felt grumpy, hungry and mad. Though he hadn't the least idea what Ronda was up to, he was sure it wasn't anything good, and he was equally certain that he and Lew had failed. They would never recover Malloy's body.

He urged his cayuse up alongside of Lew's. "The best thing we can do," he said in a low voice, "is go straight to Ranson an' confess everything. Take our chances."

"I think so, too."

"Maybe for lack of definite proof we'd get off light."

"I ain't so hopeful."

Morning came, flaming red and murky. The air was very cold. Snow-frost covered the ground. A young bull moose, grazing in a meadow, snorted loudly and crashed off through a clump of willows. They were nearing the Koyukuk and presently came to the side-trail leading to the partners' cabin.

Ronda called a halt. He spoke to Lon

Fallon, "Ride down to the edge of the clearing near the shack and see if anyone's there. Careful nobody spots you. We'll wait here."

When Fallon had gone, Ronda scowled at Yukon. "I think you lied but we'll soon find out."

Ignoring Ronda, Yukon edged close to whispering to Lew, "Ready! Let's go!"

Tiny McKeen saw something suspicious in Yukon's actions and whipped out his gun. "No funny work!" he said.

YUKON settled dejectedly in his saddle. What seemed like hours passed. Then Fallon reappeared, coming along at a fast trot. He kept looking behind him and digging in his heels. As he drew up beside them, he rolled frightened eyes at Ronda.

"They've caught our two Tena guards, Jake!" he gasped. "Pete Kinaka and Joe John Atuvuk. Them breeds musta squealed. Anyhow, the police have located the cache. I crept close enough to hear their talk. They were saddling up, that damn mountie and Ed Hart. Ranson—"

Ronda cut in savagely, "They're heading for the cache, eh?"

"Yes."

Ronda swore a blue streak. His thin sallow face turned almost black. He shouted, "Damn the luck!"

Then he grew silent. Into his expression crept that look of stealth and foxy cunning that Yukon knew influenced Jake's every mortal act.

"They'll never stick anything on me," he said through set teeth. "Not them. Come on, fellers, fast."

Ronda broke off a dead branch and flogged his cayuse into the lead as they raced down the trail. Tiny McKeen rode behind, hand on his gun-butt. They did not slacken speed for miles. Finally, fording a small creek, Jake cut eastward through jackpine bush, crossed a natural clearing, then started up a densely treed slope. Suddenly he stopped, threw down his bridle reins, dismounted and pushed his way along on foot through thick, heavy underbrush.

The rest of them had followed him and Yukon saw a rough path that led to a high-standing clump of white spruce. Among the trees a few rods ahead, covered with

lacing branches and large quantities of green Arctic moss, was a fair-sized cabin. Actually, it looked more like a green hummock or hill. On this side was a door partly concealed behind a bush, and Yukon grudgingly admitted to himself that anyone might easily pass close by here without noticing the deception.

It must be the cache! Hidden here was contraband fur—beaver. Yukon knew it was beaver because in Alaska the season was closed on beaver. But over the line in Canada taking beaver was legal this year. So many prime beaver pelts probably had tracked across the line that the wily mountie, Sergeant Davis, had suspected a big-time smuggling ring. Somehow he had learned of the route being taken by the smugglers and had traced it all the way to its source on the upper Koyukuk. No doubt, he had telegraphed the information to Ranson at Fairbanks, and Ed Hart the wildlife agent, and the boys had come here to find the smugglers' headquarters and break up the ring.

Of course, Yukon considered, Ranson and his men had to catch the crooks red-handed. They had to seize the fur. Otherwise Ronda and his gang could never be convicted. That thought had come to Ronda too, and his purpose was clear. He intended to fire the shack and destroy the pelts. Far better to lose what he had invested in here than make a foolhardy attempt to cache it somewhere else.

Under the threat of Tiny's gun, Yukon and Lew were forced to gather spruce and pine branches and carry them inside the shack. These would burn like gasoline.

Ronda took out his matchbox and leered. "We'll give the commissioner a hot reception," he said.

Yukon, Bettelman, Fallon and Tiny stood just outside the door. Abruptly there came a roar. Through plumes of smoke, Ronda came out, rubbing hands and grinning.

"That's over," he said.

They heard a curious snarl, followed by another roar. Under cover of the sound, Yukon turned to Bettelman, "There's a window at the back," he said. "Think you could grab Tiny's gun?"

Bettelman nodded and sidled toward Tiny. He was poised to jump when an exclamation from Fallon stopped him.

YUKON'S PHANTOM CACHE

"Good Lord," Fallon said, "we forgot the box!"

Yukon clamped his jaws so fast he bit his tongue. *Box!* Malloy, of course. Ronda had fetched the body here where the Tena guards could watch it day and night. But now in his hurry and eagerness to balk the police—

Ronda lurched forward. "Someone give me a hand!" he yelled.

No one moved. Smoke poured through the door. It was a raging hell in there. Yukon sprang to Ronda's side and said, "I'll help you, Jake."

Inside, Yukon held his breath as the heat swirled toward them. In a cover of smoke he turned savagely and struck Ronda on the jaw. The man went down. Yukon glided for the fur bales, arms held high to protect his face. Kicking flaming branches off one of the bales, he bent over and from a stooping position hurled the bale through the window at the back.

THIEN he saw the long, narrow box. And suddenly the thought of poor Malloy brought here from his nice comfortable grave with its imposing marker seemed like a sacrilege. And the further thought of what he and Lew had planned filled him with shame.

"We couldn't have done it," he muttered. "Wouldn't have the heart. Not even if it saved our necks."

Flames surged toward him. Another pilt of green pine branches exploded in a shower of sparks. Choking, he picked up the box, staggered toward the window—now a dim, yellow gap—and with a last mighty effort pushed the box outside.

Dropping on hands and knees, Yukon crawled back to Ronda's body and dragged it to the door, where Fallon reached in and helped them both to safety.

"Hell!" Yukon said through fits of coughing. "Just like a furnace."

Seeing his partner safe again, Bettlemen leaped and got Tiny's gun. The big man started to grapple with him and was knocked down. Yukon left Fallon, who was dragging Ronda away from the front of the blazing cabin, and staggered around to the back. The bale was there, its canvas covering badly scorched, but the furs were intact.

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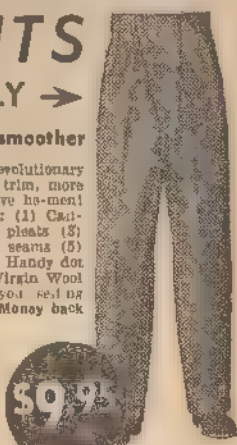
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Shouldering the bale, Yukon carried fifty yards down the slope and concealed it in some brush. Returning, he also fetched Malloy's box and was putting it down when he heard a shout.

Fearing Lew might have got into trouble, he raced to the front of the cabin just in time to see Commissioner Ranson, Ed Hart and Sergeant Davis hurrying toward them. Jake Ronda, who was now sitting up, rose smirking to his feet.

"Lookit all the swell company we're getting," he said. Then to the commissioner, "Nice hot fire, huh?"

"You dirty rat!" Ranson stormed. "You slippery crook!"

"Now that ain't fair, Mr. Ranson," Ronda said mockingly. "Besides, what proof have you got?"

"The cabin was full of your illegally caught beaver and you've destroyed it," Ranson accused him.

"I tell you that's a lie."

Ranson flushed. "It isn't a lie. Ed Hart caught your two Tena guards out

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YUKON'S PHANTOM CACHE

hunting yesterday. Their actions were so suspicious he took them to Yukon's cabin for questioning. Both of them confessed that you've been buying and storing beaver fur here on the Koyukuk for transport across the line. You've already secretly delivered thousands of dollars worth of beaver at Dawson."

"I don't even know what you're talking about."

"Commissioner, you can put the irons on him," Yukon said. "I saved some of the evidence. He's guilty. They're all guilty. And it was him too that robbed Malloy's grave. He brought the body here and stored it in the cabin. But I also rescued that. Just because Malloy had marks of violence on him from a run-in with a bear, Ronda figured he could hold that over our heads and cash in on it."

"That's just another lie," Ronda spluttered.

Yukon shook his head. "Just wait here a minute," he said.

In less than a minute he returned with the bale of beaver fur. For a split second Ronda stared at it wildly, then started to run. Sergeant Davis tripped him, then collared him. Ed Hart jubilantly shook a fist in his face. Ranson reached over and took Yukon's hand, then Lew's.

"Wonderful!" he cried. "Swell! Now we've got him, thanks to you." He paused. "And don't you worry about that business of Malloy, boys. I'll prefer no charges. After what's just happened here how can I doubt your innocence? However, you should have explained about that bear. You should have told me everything."

"Yes, sir," Yukon answered humbly. "After this we're going to tell the straight truth every time."

TWO weeks later the partners camped on Shoulder Hill under the lobster which Bettelman had designated as the Liar Tree. It pointed northeast but its lower trunk had been blazed on the side just opposite so that the marks faintly resembled a pair of eyes staring southwest.

After a lunch of jerky, bannock and tea, Yukon and Lew struck southwest into broken rock-piled hills toward a pair of towering mountains which no one had ever troubled to name. The weather was

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cloudy and there was a sharp nippy wind. Coming down over Brooks Range from Beaufort Sea, a mass of low-scudding clouds snarled in the distant peaks and put down huge loads of soft, fluffy spring snow.

"Just like old times," Yukon said. "If we don't get stalled in a blizzard, we might get there yet."

Two miles from the liar tree they came upon a cottonwood marked with a double-blaze toward the west. Blazes became more frequent after that and guided them down a long, stony flight of steps into a ravine. They started across the ravine. Ahead, among the rocks, what resembled a thin trailer of smoke wafted up along a precipitous wall.

Seeing it, Yukon broke into a gallop. "Malloy's hot spring! The poke! Lord A' Mighty, we found it!"

A stone-and-mud cabin stood near the spring. Directly behind it, chipped out of solid rock, was a short tunnel, into which the partners plunged, certain now that they had found Malloy's mine.

In the gloom at the far end of the tunnel Yukon struck a match. The richest of rich gold-bearing quartz met his eye. Lew lit more matches while Yukon examined it.

"How—how does it look?" Bettelman gulped.

Yukon turned toward him, a gleam of excitement in his deep blue eyes. But like all sourdoughs, he wasn't going to tempt fate by becoming too enthusiastic. So he winked knowingly, then solemnly crossed his fingers.

HOT-LEAD REQUIEM

(Continued from page 64)

had the girl by the arm. He was trying to twist a gun from her small fist.

Kenney reached out. He yanked Turner loose, spun him. He was half a head shorter and fifty pounds lighter than the blond young man. He unbuckled his gun belt in one gesture and tossed it to Norma.

Turner howled, "I'll kill you!" He jumped, swinging his fists. He was, it seemed, a boxer.

Kenney limped a little on his bum knee. He moved his head. He withdrew the

HOT-LEAD REQUIEM

lean flatness of his belly. He stood, swaying a little. Turner hit him in the jaw with a shrewd right.

Kenney came up, wavering a little. He walked straight ahead. Turner faced him, white with fear. Turner's practised left hand came out, the right chopped. Kenney went down.

Turner started for the door. Norma swung up one of the guns. She said, "I'll kill you, if you try it. Wait for him. He'll get up."

Turner's face glistened with cold sweat. Kenney was on his knees, then on his feet. He steadied himself with effort.

The blond man struck out weakly, without skill or guts. Kenney walked past the blow. He hit Turner on the nose. Blood spurted. Turner wept with futile rage, fighting back.

Kenney hit him in the middle, three terrible blows. Turner groaned from his toes, doubling over. Kenney smote him on the jaw with a punch that started over near Rawhide. Turner fell on his face and seemed to gnaw the carpet.

Dirt, sweat and powder smoke adorned Kenney's face. One eye was beginning to close. His clothing was dusty and torn. He looked like a man who had experienced a hard day in the mines.

The girl dropped the heavy gun belt. She walked across the room. She threw her arms around Walt Kenney and hugged him with amazing strength. She pulled down his head and kissed his face.

She said, "Bless you, Walt, bless you. I knew you'd get up."

Walt picked her off her feet and cradled her. He said, "Looks like we're both crazy—because that was a damn fool thing to do. He could have whipped me easy."

"He never could," she said stoutly. "He never had it in him. You'll never stay whipped!"

Their lips clung together. Then each noted the other's black eye.

When Abner Dey came racing in Turner was still unconscious and his daughter was rocking in the arms of Walt Kenney, laughing fit to kill. The agent said, "It's goin' to be a plumb happy life from now on. I can see that!"

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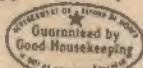
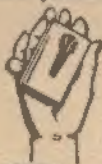
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(Continued from page 6)

Range in Owyhee County, Buffalo Horn got a chunk of lead in his back.

That bullet affected his carriage—he couldn't stand up straight anymore. The slug ranged upward to lodge against his spine, and ever afterwards he walked with a stoop—unless he died. And thereby hangs a controversy.

Piute Joe, a scout for Captain Harper of the Idaho Volunteers, swore it was his bullet, that the chief died right there, and was buried on the spot. Others maintained the wounded chieftain was spirited away to spend his days, wrathful and in misery, at a mountain hide-away in Wyoming. A third version has it that he recovered, moved to Fort Hall, and lived there as Piccua, *stooped-over* in Shoshone lingo, to which tribe the twisted one said he belonged.

Billy George, one of Buffalo Horn's braves, declared the chief was taken back to camp. When the warriors returned from the fighting, the chief had vamoosed. To where?

Some years after the fighting, rancher Si Ferrin and his punchers stumbled across a skeleton. Wanting no dead bones to clutter up the cow forage, they buried them.

When the next time in town Si ran up against the county coroner and mentioned the matter, the corpse expert said Si had burying money coming and paid him.

Delighted with that windfall, Si let drop in the nearest saloon that he guessed he had buried the remains of Buffalo Horn.

However that was, the next time Si's punchers ran across a bunch of bones, they buried them carefully so that the boss might collect some more bone bounty. It was a sweet racket, and it was miraculous the many bones the boys found that had missed their funeral.

This business kept up till one day the coroner became leery of such phenomenal luck in finding bones and dug up the last batch the boys had planted. Gazing at the find, the official shook his head. "Boys," said he, "mebbe that first batch you buried was old Buffalo Horn, but this'n here's just a plain ordinary jackass."

There was no more bone bounty.

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